

like real people do by dykenance

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Angst, Compulsory Heterosexuality, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, F/F, Fluff, Hurt/Comfort, Internalized Homophobia, Kissing, Kissing Lessons, M/M, Mild Gore, Movie Night, Past Abuse, Post-Season/Series 02, Slurs, byler, elmax - Freeform, gay slur, homophobia ment, i'll keep adding tags as i go along, it starts after the snow ball and then goes from there into s3!, theres like. One but better safe than sorry

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper/Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-08-26

Updated: 2021-03-14

Packaged: 2022-04-01 13:34:33

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 13

Words: 37,237

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

in which mike wheeler is extremely gay for will byers and in denial, will is mostly just confused, max mayfield is hardcore pining after el, and el is a big ol' lesbian and doesn't know it yet. they all try to model their relationships after what is traditionally acceptable and shenanigans ensue

1. prologue pt. 1 -Mike

Notes for the Chapter:

title inspired by king hozier

im gonna give the gays everything they want

also sorry for any awkward spacing, my formatting was strange while i was writing lmao

Without a shadow of doubt, Mike is going crazy.

For starters, he watched his best friend in the world suffer for days on end in the last month, every scream and cry from the boy tearing his heart apart. After a week of barely being able to do anything but watch...of being able to do *nothing* , Mike wants to see him have one really good night.

And even though Will was more than happy to stay home and have a movie night, or play D&D till the sun rose, the Party insisted they all show up to the Snow Ball, and that Will go too - definitely to make appearances, and not at all so they could all try to fit in their first slow dances.

And despite the fact that Mike is elated to see a smile from Will—awkward, but there—he can't help but feel a thick sludge in his stomach when he walks away to dance with that girl. The one who called him *Zombie Boy* .

He has absolutely no right to be jealous that Will has someone to dance with and he doesn't. His best friend had even turned to him, nervous eyes darting around and matching his quavering voice. Mike had encouraged him, even pushed him to go - so really, he has no right to be upset that he's alone now.

And maybe he's a terrible person for being jealous, because he didn't know how to save Will this time around - because he *couldn't* - and now that Will is finally having a good time, he feels...sucky.

Maybe, if anything, he's just sort of pissy that this girl called him

such a degrading name and still gets to dance with him. It's stupid.

But Mike ignores the thought, and he watches as Dustin snakes through the crowd, attempting to woo a girl into a dance. He shakes his head and tries to sit without looking *too* sulky.

His eyes find Will, standing at least a foot away from the girl, arms straight and hands resting safely on her waist. And Mike smiles, smiles because his favorite person in the world is smiling too, and because he's apparently the worst dancer *ever*.

Part of him thinks about walking over there when the song ends, teasing him about his skills—totally unwarranted, Mike can't dance either, but c'mon—and trying to show him how to relax and have fun with it.

But, well, that wouldn't help him with a girl at any point. Mike's taller.

That would be fruitless. Mike rests his head on his fist, a smile creeping onto his face when his sister asks Dustin for a dance. Annoying as she could be, Nancy has a good heart—and she's a complete badass. Though he'd never admit it, Mike feels lucky to have her; his big sister who won't let one of his best friends be alone for a slow dance.

He glances over to see Stacy and her stupid clique glaring because Dustin gets to dance with a high school girl, who objectively must seem, like, ten times cooler than them. And he smiles.

He does that for a while. Glances around, watches his friends, grins at their antics. He would literally live and die for them—not that he's a sap or anything.

He does this until a familiar face strolls through the door, emotional notes sounding from the surrounding speakers. Tight curls and bright doe eyes and an overwhelmingly nervous expression. El.

Mike springs to his feet, because he's excited to see her. He really is. And honestly, he can't believe his eyes, because El is here for him and Jim Hopper has not been his best friend lately, to say the least.

But she's here, and Will is here, for once at the same time. Thank god

El looks cute. Blue dress hugging her torso and puffing at her arms, light purple makeup outlining her eyes, pink gloss coating her lips. Pretty, one might say.

His heart pounds as they lock eyes. Slowly, they approach each other, nervous to break this bubble of safety. Every time they've met, they have been quickly ripped from each other's lives, so it's pretty hard for Mike to get it through his head that she's actually, physically here. Not saving the world from some imminent death, not saying goodbye to him for potentially the last time, not struggling or crying or screaming. Happy.

"You look beautiful," he manages, a polite smile breaking through his anxious expression. The girl before him ducks her head down as she smiles, nerves bubbling all around her. He swallows thickly, feeling responsible to keep up the energy of the reunion. "Do you want to dance?"

Her eyes trail around the crowd, like she's getting over the shellshock of so many kids her age just having fun, like she's still processing. "I...don't know how."

Mike grins at the modest statement, brought back to the awkward dancing he witnessed mere moments ago. "I don't either. Do you wanna figure it out?"

And with a simple nod, they're off. They link hands, and Mike has to position El's against his shoulders as they begin, which is charming enough. It reminds him of his earlier plans.

She keeps him at a close distance, fingertips brushing against his neck, soulful eyes poring into his. It's all sickly sweet and terribly familiar.

Three of four members of the party jumped out of Joyce's car and

immediately Lucas dashed off with a quick, ‘Thank you,’ absolutely just to make sure they had their own table and definitely not to catch up with a certain redhead. Mike and Will glanced at each other and chuckled, shaking their heads.

“Be careful, you two. Have fun, I’ll be close if you need me.”

Will raised an eyebrow, but Mike knew it was just in a playful way with his mother; it was a signature Will Byers ‘yeah, I’ve almost died at least twice, but I can definitely still joke about this’ look

“You promise you won’t come in? Even if I’m not actually five minutes earlier than we agreed?”

Joyce evened a look at him, squinty eyes and scrunched up lips, then broke into a smile as he started laughing. Will had a way of doing that to people—teasing until they could relax, even if it was on the topic of his own turmoil. “Yes. Fine. Three is pushing it though, mister.”

“Agreed. Love you.”

“I love you too.” She smiled fondly at Mike and waved as she went to find parking, communicating effectively that he was included in that sentiment, too.

Together, they made their way to the door, shared a reassuring look and deep breath, and crossed the doorway. Mike spotted Mr. Clarke dealing with a line of students through the next doorway just as Will pulled him to the side.

Mike blinked away surprise and raised an eyebrow. “You okay?” He spoke gently, not wanting to alert any prying ears. That phrase had carried him through a lot of the last month, and he was sure Will was absolutely wrung out from any genuine response to it, but he couldn’t help asking. Sometimes the payoff was that Will actually answered him, because Mike didn’t only ask after everything was said and done. He was there every step of the way, no matter the answer.

“Yeah,” Will nodded, a toothy grin on his face. “You just - uh, your collar.” And then Will’s fingers were on the back of his neck, and Mike could swear time slowed down as he took in the gentle details of his face.

He wasn't used to those hazel eyes being so close, holding him in a careful gaze, or the soft lips that lay slightly parted before him. He wasn't used to losing himself in Will. Luckily, before Mike could say anything stupid, the boy trailed his hands along the lapels of his jacket and patted them down, catching Mike's eye before brightly saying, "You look nice."

Then he took his hands away, holding his eye contact with Mike for a split second before joining the line for tickets.

Hazel and brown and sleek hair and curls swirl in Mike's vision and he can't distinguish between then and now, but he's leaning in until lips collide with his and he gets a warm, stirring sensation in his stomach. He pushes closer as they sway and pulls away, and solid brown eyes are smiling back at him. El presses her forehead against his and he's calm. He's happy.

He's confused.

But he's also tired and overwhelmed. And El is here now, and she's romantic and soft and strong as hell and she wants him. So, he sticks to figuring things out with her as the night goes on.

Scuffed up converse and too-big dress shoes are pressed up against the passenger seat in Joyce's car as Mike and Will wait side by side for her to finish a conversation with Hopper.

Mike can see the moment in his head of Jonathan giving the old pair to Will, and he smiles at the time that went into polishing them to look fresh. He can imagine Joyce kneeling down to tie them for her son even if he protested, because it was his big night. His first school dance.

And he remembers the hell he went through to get his mother to allow the converse. He tried every method he could think of - begging, silent treatment, and finally, bargaining. As long as she could take several pictures and he *promised* to wear real dress shoes to prom, then, she sighed, he could wear the stupid converse.

As soon as he realizes he's been gazing down at their shoes with a moonstruck look, he shakes his head and turns to Will.

"So, *Footloose* , how was your first dance with what's-her-name?"

Will keeps his eyes down on his knuckles, a blush forming on his cheeks. "It - it was fine." He pauses, taking his time to think about what he wanted to say next. It was a very Will thing to do - he was always careful, never wanting to offend or be misconstrued - and if it were anybody else, Mike might grow impatient; but he had always appreciated the care with which Will spoke, and the gentleness that came about as a result. "How was your first kiss?"

He says it like he's teasing, with the same tone that he used with his mother earlier, but he doesn't meet Mike's eye for a moment.

"It wasn't my first." For no conceivable reason, Mike's throat constricts as he says it, like it was somehow wrong or rude. He quickly tries to fix it, "I mean, cause, you know - last year."

Will's brows furrow, but he's smiling, like he's trying to see through whatever just happened in Mike's mind. He's usually pretty good at this. "Right, I forgot. Well, congrats. Seems romantic."

"Yeah." Mike smiles, remembering gentle fingers and pretty eyes and soft lips from earlier that night. "Uh, did you wanna kiss that other girl?"

Will hums in thought. "No," he pauses, and a guilty look crosses his face. "Honestly, I didn't even really want to dance with her."

Mike's eyebrows shoot up. "I - what - then why did you, Will?"

The boy crosses his arms, protecting himself from some imaginary world where Mike might actually be upset over this. "I just," he sighs heavily, letting his head fall back against the car seat behind him. "I didn't want her to feel bad, you know? I didn't want to reject her. And you..." he lets the rest of that sentence fizzle out, leaving Mike to fill it in.

"I did push you to, huh," he says softly. Will looks startled by the response. That he didn't have to fight for someone to get it.

Will shrugs. "It's all good. I know you guys wanted me to have fun. And I did, I'm just tired."

Mike could tell. The boy's head swiveled from one side to the other during the conversation, settling at a painful angle in the opposite direction of Mike. In a quiet moment, Mike scoots to close the already small gap between them and bumps Will's shoulder with his. Tentatively, the other boy shifts and rests his cheek against Mike's shoulder, and a secret smile reaches Mike's face.

"Sleepover?" he asks after a few moments of them breathing in sync.

Will lets out a small noise in response. "Yeah, sure. Is it cool if it's at my house though? My mom is still a little..."

"Yeah, of course."

Will yawns and slumps further into Mike's side, and Mike feels a little flutter in his heart. It had become a routine carried out between them in the dark, when no judging eyes could shame or ruin it; Mike would let Will rest against him, hold on as tight as he wanted, snuggle into his side as much as it took for him to feel safe.

Really, he didn't even mind when he had to do all the talking for both of them, or half-carry Will inside on the bad days. It was all worth it.

But he also knew it couldn't last forever.

Notes for the Chapter:

hey! please leave kudos/comment if you enjoyed <3
and follow my new st tumblr if you'd like! you can
send me a message or prompt there if you'd like to. it
is @lesbian-hopper
this fic will go back and forth between byler/elmax
as their stories align. im excited to keep posting!!

2. prologue pt. 2-Max

Summary for the Chapter:

Moments later, Max exits the bathroom with dry, warm apparel--a pair of some loosely fitting pants and a big, puffy Christmas sweater. It's red with a slight turtleneck--something she's absolutely not used to wearing--and cute outlines of reindeer and snowflakes.

El beams at her, eyes magnificently illuminated by the Christmas lights in the house. "Pretty," is what Max is pretty sure she mumbles, and she can only hope her blush is lost in the dim lighting.

Notes for the Chapter:

hi! hope you enjoy this one. follow my st tumblr @lesbian-hopper to send me messages or prompts or whatever you'd like!!

Max knows rejection like she knows her own name.

Her stupid step-brother, Billy, takes time every day to remind her that he refuses to accept her as a sister. Her instinctive flinching any time he gets too close is a reliable reminder of that. And her mother is too far gone to help her escape it; apparently she doesn't care enough to save her daughter.

And these kids at her new school took forever to trust her - they gawked after her all the time; but when she tried to embrace it, suddenly they were too smart and manly for her? Bullshit.

Needless to say, Max thought she was prepared for any form of rejection. No part of her life is safe from people dropping her like a fly.

So she couldn't figure out why it stung so bad when it was El.

Sticking out her hand, smiling, Max tried so hard to be cool when El

came up to her. The girl looked wicked - slicked back hair, heavy eyeliner, big boots - and Max had finally understood why the boys were obsessed with her. She was like a hero from a comic book.

But the girl simply looked her over with a frown and stormed past, checking her shoulder on the way. And it did hurt.

Because El was clearly incredible, and even though Max admittedly wanted her acceptance so Mike would warm up to her, she also wanted to be her friend. She wanted, more than anything in that moment, for the pretty girl with the cool look to like her.

Max had stared at the ground as the reunions continued, holding back stinging tears. Crying over a girl was certainly not the way to gain the respect of the Party. So she buried it.

When Christmastime rolled around, Max stuck by her newfound friends. Another year in the Hargrove household meant another year of drinking till your brain melted and screaming in the face of innocent decorations. So Max thought maybe this year, it could be like old times - just without her mom.

No one even notices when she slips out from Christmas Eve to meet at the Byers' house.

As she steps into the biting air, realizing that she'd left the house in merely a windbreaker and hat, Max stuffs her hands into her pockets and walks as fast as she can manage without slipping. At least she's used to this kind of thing from skateboarding - knowing her limits.

When she approaches the long driveway of the Byers' humble abode, she immediately notices the figure of a young girl waving as a cop car drives off. El. *Shit*.

She's too far along to back against another parked car or duck down, so Max continues walking as casually as she can. As she does, she tries not to be too jealous of the big fluffy coat that El has on, and she ignores the thought of El ever sharing it with her, even though it's big enough.

“Max?” comes that voice, slightly raspy and quiet, and always careful, like she’s trying out the phrases for the first time ever. *Well, she could be* , Max realizes. She’d never heard her say her name.

The ginger clears her throat, afraid of any croakiness from earlier that night. “Yeah?” *Nonchalance is key* , she thinks to herself. *Nothing to be scared of* .

El looks at her like a thousand different images are flying through her mind and she can’t decide which is real. “A-aren’t you cold?”

And, well, Max melts. “Uh, yeah, actually.” With perfect timing, her nose starts running, and she snuffles. “Cold night.” *Obviously, genius.*

El nods and then spins around on her heel. Facing the house, she says, “Come in, then.”

Max is baffled by the interaction, but she smiles and goes along with it.

The door closes behind Max and immediately El takes her jacket, reaching up on tiptoe to hang it. She scrutinizes Max after, and as Max wonders where she learned all of this, El says, “You need new clothes.”

Max is certain her cheeks are maroon from a terrible mixture of the winter breeze and a solid blush.

Stupidly, she asks, “Uh, why?” but El moves along quickly, taking her hat to place it by the fireplace and grabbing her hand to lead her to the other kids.

“Catch a cold.” El says it firmly, like this is a phrase she’s heard a billion times before and she’s positive that she must assist Max on this mission for dry clothing. A dopey smile crosses Max’s cheeks, because the whole thing is too goddamn endearing for her, and now they’re holding hands.

El pushes into Will’s room, knocking gently before opening the door. “Will?”

Will looks up from a spirited conversation with Dustin. “Hi,” he says.

He glances at Max with a smile as a greeting. "What's up?"

El is cut off briefly by the other boys shouting their own greetings, to which Max smiles and waves. El offers a tight smile, but seems pretty set on her current goal. "Max needs some clothes..." she trails off, glancing around at Will's room. "Can you ask your mom?"

"Oh, yeah, sure." Will jumps up, careful not to knock down the boys' array of snacks and drinks. "We'll finish this later, Dustin. But I'm right."

Dustin lets out a little, 'Pfft,' shuffling some cards in his hands, and then Will giggles and follows the girls.

"Mom!" Will calls out as they walk into the kitchen. "You in here?"

Joyce pops up from the living room, rushing over to the three of them. "Is everything okay?" she asks urgently, looking over Will quickly and grabbing his shoulders. After a reassuring look from him, she drops her hands and smiles softly at the trio. Then she catches sight of Max. "Oh, sweetheart, you must be freezing."

"Yeah," Will pipes back up as Max nods in response. "She needs a change of clothes. Do you have anything?"

Joyce nods, a smile finding its way to her lips. "Of course! Come with me."

Moments later, Max exits the bathroom with dry, warm apparel - a pair of some loosely fitting pants and a big, puffy Christmas sweater. It's red with a slight turtleneck - something she's absolutely not used to wearing - and cute outlines of reindeer and snowflakes.

El beams at her, eyes magnificently illuminated by the Christmas lights in the house. "Pretty," is what Max is pretty sure she mumbles, and she can only hope her blush is lost in the dim lighting. She shrugs her shoulders up and hides in the turtleneck just in case.

"Thanks."

El nods and finds her way over to her boyfriend, and Max coincidentally manages to snap out of her stupor.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Byers," Max says graciously, smiling at the woman. "I appreciate it."

"No worries, hon," she says, as though it was the most normal thing in the world to be so kind. Max sniffs inconspicuously to distract herself from tearing up. "Let me know if you need anything else. I'll call when dinner is ready, okay?"

Max nods and smiles, hugging herself in the great big sweater, feeling the most secure she has felt in a long time.

Some moments call for a moment of truth.

The Party hangs out in the living room, all sprawled on the couch or the floor, letting themselves be a little bit more vulnerable than usual. It's now or never for Max to confront El, who seemed to open a door for their friendship earlier that night. They can be friends, but Max needs to level the playing field. She needs to know one thing.

"El? Why didn't you like me?" Max asks, willing her voice to remain level and not too desperate. "I mean, what did I ever do to you?"

El's eyes go wide at the question. "Mike. I saw you with Mike..."

Something inside of Max crushes. Once again, she was judged for how she related to a man. Before she even got the chance to introduce herself to El, she was shrugged off because she was written off as a threat to a romance.

Max is going to throw up.

"I don't need your stupid boyfriend. I have one of my own."

"Hey!"

"No, sorry, I didn't mean that." Max softens a bit and grabs Lucas's hand, mentally kicking herself, but he smiles again pretty easily. "I just meant I have a boyfriend, so why would I go after Mike? Especially when he -" She cuts off, not wanting to create some stupid pity party for herself.

“When he what?” El asks softly, and Max is troubled because she adores El’s voice and she doesn’t want to fight anymore - definitely not in front of the group - she just wants to curl into a ball for hours.

Max gnaws on both of her lips before speaking. “When it’s clear he likes you. When he obviously hates me.”

“I don’t hate you -”

“Oh, I -”

“Guys, can we please stop?” comes Will’s voice, and Max turns her head quickly to look at him. “Come on. It’s Christmas Eve. Can we please just get along and watch a movie or something?”

Max notices something in his expression other than the desperation to get them to shut up. She sees a sort of sadness in the way that he won’t look any of them in the face, in the way his shoulders slump over as he balances his head on his fist. Maybe he’s just tired, but it makes Max want to find the time to talk to him alone. See what they might have in common.

Slowly, Mike nods along and squeezes El’s shoulders as he talks. “Yeah, you’re right Will.” Mike holds his gaze on the boy for a moment, but he won’t meet it, so he shakes his head silently and turns to Max. “Max, I’m sorry. I was just really stressed and I didn’t want to trust someone new so fast again. I was scared. I shouldn’t have treated you like that, though. Truce?”

There he is. The Mike that Max hoped he would be - she had begun to worry that he was just some glorified asshole. “Truce.” She shakes his hand, smiling lightly. “But don’t underestimate me again, okay? I can handle myself.”

Mike smiles. “Okay.”

And El is looking at her with an odd expression, her head tilted and a faint sort of smile on her lips. She snaps out of it when Max looks her way, and shifts her eyes to something behind her.

Finally, Max feels like she might have a place in the party.

“I have a present for you, too,” are the next real words that El says to Max. It’s Christmas day, and they all agreed to stop by Mike’s for gift exchanges.

Max is dumbfounded. “Really?”

El nods slowly, and reaches into the pocket of her jeans. “I don’t know what you like. But...” she trails off, and holds an incredibly thin package in the palm of her hand.

Curiosity taking over, Max carefully takes the present, her fingers brushing El’s palm. It’s a quick moment, but she glances quickly at El’s face to see if her heart rate seemed to pick up, too. But she’s too hard to read.

Max unwraps the package to find a braided thread pattern, stripes of pink and orange and blue woven together. Handmade.

She looks up at the other girl, who’s gazing at her with those big brown eyes, in complete disbelief. To Max, it is the sweetest thing ever - here she was, convinced that El hated her. But apparently the girl learned how to make bracelets and sat down and made one for her. Especially for her. El’s hands had spent time working through this small goddamn bracelet and it was automatically Max’s favorite gift. She loved it.

El’s eyes dart between her and the bracelet, asking a silent, “*Well?*” because for a few moments Max forgets how to speak.

“I really love it. Thank you so much, El.” She wills herself to not blush or get too smiley and freak the other girl out.

But the other girl just smiles proudly, shifting her eyes down to her feet. She nods what Max assumes is, “You’re welcome.”

Max holds up her wrist in front of her face and attempts to wrap the bracelet around and tie with one hand, which proves to be very difficult for her clumsy fingers. She has a tendency to move too fast all the time, and this creates certain challenges - such as the absolute battle of getting a friendship bracelet on.

“Uh, here.” El lets out a small breath of amusement through her nose and then takes the bracelet in a calm, careful grasp, stabilizing Max’s wrist and then tying it on for her. She looks up and says, “Is that good?” And all Max can do is nod, because she’s finally getting what she wants. She finally has people to love, and she’s so so happy. *Finally* .

But she doesn’t see El again for months.

Notes for the Chapter:

i love my girls :) they're so sweet
i call this one 'the shortest enemies-to-friends-(to
lovers)' arc ever
anyway!! please comment/leave kudos if you liked
<3

3. Will

Summary for the Chapter:

Sitting next to Mike in a dark movie theater proves to be too much for Will to handle.

He was fine when Mike was running late, fine while he and Lucas and Max waited amidst screaming kids and bright neon lights and intense aromas of fried food floating into their nostrils. Will even survived when Mike showed up and excitedly cried out his name before anything else.

Notes for the Chapter:

hey! follow my tumblr @lesbian-hopper if you'd like, and enjoy!

Will's life is swallowed in isolation.

He misses his friends. He misses D&D, movie nights, and riding bikes together past dark--even if the latter is considerably dangerous now. And he doesn't want to throw a pity party for himself--sometimes he even hates his own thoughts--but with the gate being closed and the Mindflayer gone, it seems like the Party has forgotten about him.

It hurts most with Mike. El came back and the boy pulled away from Will, past everything he's known for years, to be with some girl. It's tearing him apart. Before, the boy never left Will's side--even when he could have faded away in his own body. Mike always held on.

Now, Will doesn't know what to think.

Because he's used to the Mike that narrated games so passionately that it sent chills down Will's spine, geeked out over new movies with him, and invited him over to play video games at every opportunity. Now, he rarely sees the boy outside of school, as the rest of his day is spent at El's cabin.

It isn't Will's business, anyway. He just does his best to reinvent a

somewhat normal life for himself and heal. When he gets home, he destroys pictures of the Mindflayer, rearranges his room. He does everything he can think of to air out the dregs of feeling haunted in his own home.

One night, Will wakes up with a scream trapped in his throat, breathing heavily and gripping at his sheets for stability. His eyes immediately find the spot where Mike's sleeping bag had laid on the floor a short time ago. When the spot is empty of the mess of curls and extra blankets, Will lets go of the sheets, lets go of the frustration, the pain, everything, and just sobs.

"Will? Will, what's wrong?" The boy had taken hold of his wrist, restoring Will's touch with reality, even if for just a little while.

Will slowed his trembling breaths as he gazed at the other boy, fixated on details that could keep him grounded. Freckled cheekbones, chapped lips, concerned eyes darting between his. Fingertips brushing the back of his hand.

"Just...a bad dream," Will murmured, forcing his eyes to come into focus. At this point, he maintained about seventy percent control of his body, but this creeping sensation was slowly ebbing away at him. And he couldn't stop it.

Mike pressed on, moving to sit next to Will on the bed. "What about?"

Invisible dark fingers came up around his throat and pressed back the answer, tried to shove his head under a shadow of silence. "We lose." His lungs collapsed in his chest and he was heaving, elbows on his knees, holding his head between his hands. "You die. I'm all alone..."

"Will, that won't happen! It's okay, it's okay, it's okay..." it all echoed in his mind, bouncing around his consciousness and then figures were swirling in his vision and he was sure he was fainting or maybe dying.

But then Mike Wheeler locked their fingers together and kept his grip on reality alive once again.

Will smiled sadly. "You'd be okay, you know. If he... if he got me." But he knew it was a lie. Michael Wheeler would keep searching and trying if there was even the smallest chance that Will was out there. He knew that. But he wanted Mike to be okay. And maybe that was enough.

"That's not true." Mike squeezed his hand, just to prove his point. Or maybe, Will thought, to remind himself that Will was still tangible and breathing and real. Because this was hurting him too. "What would I do without my cleric?"

Finally, Will could smile. Mike was good with that; he always seemed to know what to say or do when it came to Will. Though Mike was a loud speaker, usually shouting about whatever excited him at any given moment, he seemed to let himself soften into this warm ball of light around Will.

Will loved it so much it hurt.

"I'm always gonna be here, okay? I promise." The boy smiled a cute, crooked smile, and Will was falling, falling, falling. "It'll probably get so annoying, you'll wanna kick me out."

Not possible.

Will nodded slowly, a weak smile forming on his lips. "Thank you." It was hardly a whisper.

And then he leaned back against his pillow, trying to convince himself he was comfortable enough for sleep. He got lost in the feeling of Mike's palm against his own and silently wished he could keep their fingers intertwined forever.

"Goodnight, Will."

"Night, Mike."

That night, Will Byers had fallen asleep holding Mike Wheeler's hand.

Now, he never felt more alone.

It's not that Will expects cuddling or anything stupid like that--it wasn't necessarily normal between friends--but he can't deny that he misses his best friend like crazy. Even when everything seemed futile, Mike could calm him down, and sometimes even make him laugh--like the night when he mimicked some rockstar's performance and it was so stupid that Will was completely cracking up as he watched. The boy's eyes crinkled as he got really into the song, his deepening voice cracking, and as he finished he fell to his knees with gusto. Then he collapsed back onto the bed next to Will, giggling and looking up to see if he'd made Will really smile--so stupid.

Stupid, stupid, stupid .

It hurt too much to think about.

Just one look, and I fell so hard in love with you.

Will never knew that his coping method was listening to old sixties love songs and sprawling on his bed in despair. It wasn't his usual music taste, but sulking with the old tunes in the background made a small part of him feel better.

That is, until his older brother innocently passes by his door, then backtracks as he sees the situation.

"Will, what on earth are you listening to?"

Will opts for a few moments of silence, simply staring at his brother, because he has to know *damn* well what this is. He was always knowledgeable about music stuff. "The sixties, Jonathan. They're calling to me."

Jonathan cringes and enters the room, sitting on the edge of Will's bed. "Dude, you're basically listening to the same song over and over." Will continues to stare at the ceiling, avoiding the

confrontation. "I know somewhere deep down you have some taste. I taught you right." When Will still stays quiet, Jonathan softens up on his jokes. "Come on, man. What's bugging you?"

Will sighs and sluggishly pulls himself into a sitting position, mirroring the position of all those years ago when their mom and dad were fighting. When Jonathan shielded him from all that and protected him like his lousy father should have. When Will barely reached his shoulder sitting down. He tried not to tear up over the time changing so much, because, well, that would be stupid.

"There's..." he pauses while his mouth tries to form the right words. "There's an issue with the guys, right now." He figures this is the least awkward way to say it. "I feel like they're pulling away from me to be with their girlfriends and I just want some time to hang out with them again."

Jonathan glances down at him and smiles teasingly. "So, you're listening to mildly depressing sixties love songs because your buddies aren't hanging out with you?" Will shoots him a deadpan glare even though he knows Jonathan is messing around. "Alright, alright. Why don't you just ask if they'll do something for, like, a guy's night? Restart movie night or something? Or, hell, they can even bring their girlfriends, but at least you won't be stuck at home alone."

"I suppose..." Will gets a jolt of energy and he wants to ask them all to do it now, now, *now*. "Yeah, alright, I'll try calling them. Thanks, Jonathan!" He beams and runs from the room to get the phone.

He can hear his older brother say a soft, 'No problem,' through chuckles as he heads back to his own room.

Sitting next to Mike in a dark movie theater proves to be too much for Will to handle.

He was fine when Mike was running late, fine while he and Lucas and Max waited amidst screaming kids and bright neon lights and intense aromas of fried food floating into their nostrils. Will even survived when Mike showed up and excitedly cried out his name

before anything else.

The couple in their presence started poking fun at the latecomer as they hid snacks in pockets and bags, but Will was preoccupied with how they kept bumping shoulders and Mike's bright smile every time he looked up. But even then, he was fine.

Now, Will is a bodice of rigidity, clinging to his bag of sweets like a lifeline. Every time their hands bump against each other accidentally while reaching for a bite Will clams up. So he tries to time it perfectly and only reach in directly after Mike does, which reduces the bumpage by a large percentage. It's a perfect plan.

Except even then, Mike sometimes leans back over ridiculously quickly, so they still accidentally link fingers a couple times.

Dude, how hard is it to stick with the program?

Is Will shivering? He feels like he's buzzing, trembling with some secret current of electricity--

"Hey, are you cold?"

Mike's breath spills across Will's neck, tickling his ear, and the internal battle of pulling away and leaning further in wreaks havoc in his mind. He remains frigidly still, his eyes glued to the screen.

And actually, he is chilly. The darkness surrounding them, particles floating around in the projector light, and cranked up air conditioning has memories of the Upside Down smacking back through his mind like the impact of a train on his body. A small whimper escapes his mouth.

"Will?"

The boy jolts back to the present, snapping his head in the direction of Mike.

Mike .

Mistake number one. The boy is supporting himself with Will's armrest, concern drawn all over his features...

“Yeah, um, a little bit. I’m alright though.” Will smiles unconvincingly, swallowing with difficulty because Mike is *so damn close* .

Mike nods and pulls back, *thank God* , and then he’s taking off his sweater and Will’s eyes widen, taking notice of Mike’s long neck and the thin sweater that rides up against his stomach...

“Here.” The boy drops his thicker sweater on Will’s lap with a stupid, charming smile.

“I--” Will smiles a bit to show his appreciation, and try to tease him a little bit. “I have my own jacket, you know,” he finishes, referring to the one that had fallen to the ground over time.

Mike shrugs, one eyebrow cocking up. “Body heat works better than a cold floor.”

Then he turns back to the screen, so Will takes the deep breath he couldn’t manage for a bit there. He chuckles to himself, realizing that was possibly a dig at their situation months previous with Mike on the floor. Maybe Will wasn’t alone in considering the other options back then.

Nah, of course he was.

When he slips the sweater over his head, it’s like being wrapped in a hug from Mike, warm, addicting.

Will pulls the oversized sleeves down past his hands for comfort and dips his nose down by the collar, breathing in slowly, and he thinks he might pass out from pure bliss. It’s heavenly warm from *Mike’s* body heat, and it’s Mike’s laundry detergent, Mike’s shampoo, a distinctly boyish scent that must have bled into the fabric from his skin. He ignores the trace of sickly sweet girl’s shampoo.

Luckily, the dark theater hides his stupid smile from the rest of the world for just a little while.

“So, why were you late today, lover boy?” Lucas teases once the

movie is over, linking hands with his own girlfriend. Will thinks this is pretty ironic, but whatever.

Mike clams up, face pinkening under the neon lights surrounding them. "I was with El...I just lost track of time, man, I'll be more careful next time."

Will butts in, "Next time?" He wants to smack himself for being so excited even though Mike was literally *just* talking about being with El.

The boy opposite him smiles a small, dare he say *shy* smile, and nods.

Max raises her eyebrows, but then she just sips on her cola and distracts herself with an advertisement on the wall in front of them. Lucas, on the other hand, focuses on what Mike said.

"Yeah, well, I have a girlfriend too and I was on time."

"She's literally right here!"

"Yeah, and?" Lucas gives Mike the sternest look he can in this slightly teasing mood he's in. Will smiles to himself, appreciation for these idiots swelling in his chest despite the dumb arguing. He's happy to see them again. "Even if she couldn't, I would have been prompt. That's just who I am, I guess."

Mike's jaw drops, and then he gets that classic Mike pout on his face and Will has to look away.

"Guys, alright, it's not a big deal. We got to see the whole movie and everything, so let's just forget it," Max says calmly, though Will can see that faint, 'I'm rolling my eyes internally' expression on her face.

Mike and Lucas look at each other for a moment, and then all is shrugged off and they're back to more casual bickering.

"So when are you gonna propose then?"

"Lucas!"

And Will is smiling and caught up in laughing at the conversation

until a chilly breeze blows the scent from Mike's sweater in his face, and he's aware of it pooling at his wrists and clinging to his hips.

"Wait, Mike! Your sweater," he alerts the boy. He starts to shimmy out of it, holding his breath so he doesn't get sidetracked.

"It's okay, man. You can keep it." Mike smiles and pulls the parts that Will disrupted back down into place, and Will's heart throbs against his chest. Because he's startled or something, and definitely not because Mike is gently running his hands against his sides like it's the most natural thing in the world.

Will sucks in a deep breath. "Are you sure? I don't want you to get cold."

Mike half-smirks, and it's like he personally wrenches Will's insides. "It's more important to me that you don't, dude. Don't worry about it." And for a moment, he doesn't step away, he just smiles and gazes down at him. And Will's heart is throbbing at how *sweet* that statement is and because maybe he likes the way Mike towers over him when he stands so close.

"Do you want my jacket?" Will asks, and he brings up the coat between them just to add a *little* space.

Mike shakes his head. "Don't worry about it," he emphasizes. "Just worry about *you* staying warm, okay?"

Then he steps back and joins stride with Lucas again, and Will and Max fall into step together, talking casually about the movie, which helps Will get his mind off everything and settle down.

And everything fits together somehow.

Notes for the Chapter:

ahhhh ok wow i really appreciate the comments i got about max's characterization; i'm really happy that it struck people in a good way!! i'm expecting to have the next chapter posted by sunday, if not earlier. as usual, please leave any feedback you have for me in the comments, i greatly appreciate anything you

have to say!!

4. El

Summary for the Chapter:

“Max?” She calls out carefully, her hand floating down to the door handle, ready to push it open. “Are you okay?”

The other girl whips the door open before she gets the chance. El falls forward a bit, as she was leaning on the door, and now she’s gazing up at Max’s bright, concerned blue eyes and rich red lips and her flowing red hair, and she takes an extra moment to straighten herself out. ‘Pretty,’ drowns out all of her other thoughts.

Notes for the Chapter:

tumblr: @lesbian-hopper :D

El *has* to be missing something from all of this kissing with Mike.

It’s not that it’s unpleasant; in fact, it’s nice in a way. She likes the feeling of his hand on her cheek or in her own, and the pressure of his torso leaning against her--it’s like a prolonged hug.

But the actual extended kissing, his mouth encasing hers, is pretty lackluster. It was an exciting, new experience the first few times, but now she sort of feels like she could kiss anything—a fruit, her pillow, her arm—and get the same emotional response.

In her soaps it was always this amazing, magical moment: the music swelled, the camera zoomed in, and the actors stared at each other all lovesick before the inevitable romantic embrace. They simply defined this word, ‘love,’ to her understanding.

Something just isn't clicking with her experience.

Even in her own friend group she noticed a gap between what she felt and what the other couple demonstrated. El tried to pick up tips from Max eventually to see if maybe, just maybe, she was doing it wrong. Maybe she wasn't following some secret rule book and that's why it wasn't so satisfactory. So she secretly gazed at those cherry red lips, sliding against Lucas's with the slightest sense of a smile, and she noted the way her hands explored his hair, face, shoulders.

She seemed happy. It had to be normal, so El would just learn how to like it.

After giving Dustin a small hug upon his return and proceeding to latch herself onto Mike's arm, El quickly gets bored. The boys start rambling about some radio device, and with the only exciting moment being finding out about Dustin's girlfriend, El detaches herself and quietly explores the house.

The cabin, while home to many of her better memories in life, grows more suffocating by the day, and it's nice to be somewhere different for a change. Dustin's house is a bit smaller than what she remembers of Mike's, but bigger than the Byers'-- *in the middle* .

As she wanders through a small hallway, she hears some muffled talking coming from the bathroom. It sounds like Max, but why would she be having a conversation in there? It's a pretty solitary space, or so it seems, as El remembers the struggle of learning to trust that she'd be able to reopen the door once she was finished, and that

only *she* could lock herself in. The power was in her hands.

She taps on the door a couple times, palm flat, mimicking what her dad would do on her bedroom door to enforce respect for privacy.

Truthfully, she doesn't know where she stands with Max. The girl has always been kind to her despite their cold beginnings, and she's really pretty. Plus, she barely talks to Mike, so El had nothing to worry about in the first place. But it's still a little stiff whenever they talk--probably because El had breezed past the girl when they first properly met. She didn't fully know how to handle her feelings about that, to express that she'd like to try again, or just move on, but she tried her best.

There were a few times when they talked around the holidays since everyone was together, but in the months since, she's barely seen any of the others besides Mike. So, no time to properly fix that issue.

"Max?" She calls out carefully, her hand floating down to the door handle, ready to push it open. "Are you okay?"

The other girl whips the door open before she gets the chance. El falls forward a bit, as she was leaning on the door, and now she's gazing up at Max's bright, concerned blue eyes and rich red lips and her flowing red hair, and she takes an extra moment to straighten herself out. *Pretty*, drowns out all of her other thoughts.

"Is this zit really that bad?" Max asks, taking her hand and pulling her into the bathroom. El doesn't even mind that they're both a little clammy from the summer heat, she likes the feel of Max's hand in

hers and her heart is doing little flips like she's never felt before. "Sorry, I know we're not this close, but, is it *bad*?"

El blinks a few times. "Ah, no." She realizes what Max is talking about as soon as the girl drops her hand and reaches up on tip-toe to look at herself in the mirror, hyper-focusing on a small red dot on her forehead. El hadn't even noticed it among all of her other features, and anyway, it wasn't some crazy evil blemish or anything. "It's not bad...why?"

Max sighs heavily. "Lucas asked if it was 'new,' which, what kind of jackass asks that anyway? Is he keeping track?" She fumes, grunting at the vision of herself in the mirror. El wipes a smile from her face--apparently Max is cute when she's huffy--because this is obviously a hugely serious situation. "Okay, he can't know that I was checking. I don't want him to think his stupid comments upset me or whatever. I can handle *that* ." Then she's mumbling to herself, going on about '*With everything else going on ...*' and El really wants to ask about it but she doesn't.

Instead, she steps forward, pushed by a want for her friend to feel better. To extend an 'olive branch,' whatever that means. In this moment, she doesn't need to keep her nice thoughts to herself. "Max, you look really pretty."

The girl snaps her head up, and El is met with the most genuine and grateful smile she's seen in her life and she suddenly wants to compliment Max for the rest of the day, or maybe her life.

"I--"

The door pushes open from behind El and she jumps, then sees that it's just Mike. Out of habit, she grabs onto his arm.

"Hey, Dustin wants to go set up his new radio set." He glances over to Max, who shakes her head and replaces her smile with a relatively neutral expression. El misses the smile immediately. "Lucas was just about to come looking for you, Max."

Max nods quickly. "Alright, thanks." She focuses her gaze on El with a bright smile, her eyes glowing. "Thank you, by the way, El." She gently pushes past the two of them, and El is maybe following her with her eyes as she passes. Maybe she almost follows her physically until she remembers to just keep holding onto Mike, because that was safe. He was her safe spot, and there would be other times to find Max alone.

Later, they end up back on her bed, back to the regularly scheduled makeout session.

El tried to work up the nerve to talk to Max again, or come up with something to say to Will or Lucas or Dustin, but she didn't in time before she agreed to sneak away with Mike. It felt 'romantic,' like something that the people in her shows would do. Run away from others to be with their person. Right?

She imagines herself with those dazzling red lips, pushing against a matching pair, letting her hands explore the hair and shoulders of the person in front of her. The moment blends together perfectly, and she can almost forget that she's stuck with the awkward boy until her dad interrupts, insisting the *three inch* rule.

It all soars by in a blur--backing up against her wall as though she wasn't just locking lips with her friend, sitting next to Mike during the most awkward conversation she'd ever been put through with Hopper, wringing her hands in her lap despite the giggle she lets out when her dad death glares at the two of them whispering. And then Mike is being dragged out of her room, practically shooting outside when he thinks his 'Nana' is in trouble.

El breathes in a bit of anxiety, hoping that Mike is alright, and breathes relief. A break.

The next day when El wakes up, she expects to hear familiar knocking at the door. She expects to invite Mike in and talk for a few minutes and then start up the regular routine again. However, he doesn't show up, doesn't call, nothing. So, she takes charge.

El kicks at the foot of her bed once the phone call ends. The one person, one friend that she'd spent all of her time with for *months* , who taught her the sacred 'friends don't lie,' rule, had just blatantly lied to her. She could handle almost anything in the world, but with this one person that she'd come to trust, she'd didn't think she would be put through the pain of betrayal of those feelings.

Never has she felt more alone. But she knows what she has to do.

Notes for the Chapter:

i hope you enjoyed a new POV! please leave comments/kudos/any feedback that you have, i really appreciate you all reading <3

5. Will

Summary for the Chapter:

Will's chest sears as he realizes, and he screams out, "Mike!" before he can stop himself. He was never meant to suffer because of Will's stupidity. Mike's eyes widen with fear and fill with tears, tears so hot that Will can feel them burning through his skin, and the boy starts screaming and shaking against his restraints. Will sobs, trying to move his cement, broken body to meet him, to hold him and hide him and tell him everything will be okay. He can keep them safe.

Then everything goes black.

Notes for the Chapter:

tumblr: @lesbian-hopper

Will's droopy eyes open to a world cloaked in darkness. Frozen fingers fumble in the ground at his sides, slime and dirt getting trapped in his nails. Above his head sit drawings and photos carrying years of memories within, ones he wishes he could reach. They're all too far away.

The beginning notes of 'Should I Stay or Should I Go?' blare through thickets of trees. Carefully, Will stands, knees wobbly and vision blurring. He trails his fingertips along the smiling photos of his mother, friends in silly poses. Mike gazing at him happily.

He chokes down tears and sucks in a deep breath as he whips open the flap of Castle Byers. Viscous snake-like creatures and plants squirm under his quiet feet, carrying him from tree to tree as he leans against each sickeningly gooey one for support. There's no way his feet will carry him without.

His ears lead him through the never-ending lines of trees, the tune distorted by the space and distance it travels across. As he gets closer, dry-heaving from the effort of moving, he sees figures in the distance. Perhaps, for once, not of the monster hunting his every waking moment. Maybe it's his family.

One tree holds all of his weight as he gazes ahead, the song louder than ever. He found the hub. He found it and it's painfully loud, distorting everything, screaming guitar and shrieky vocals filling his ears. He flinches and clings onto the tree, forcing his eyes open to see what the result of his travel holds.

Ahead of him sits Mike, mouth gagged and hands tied.

Will's chest sears as he realizes, and he screams out, "Mike!" before he can stop himself. He was never meant to suffer because of Will's stupidity. Mike's eyes widen with fear and fill with tears, tears so hot that Will can feel them burning through his skin, and the boy starts screaming and shaking against his restraints. Will sobs, trying to move his cement, broken body to meet him, to hold him and hide him and tell him everything will be okay. He can keep them safe.

Then everything goes black.

Will blinks groggily. After a moment of remaining completely still, glancing around to assert that this is real, safe life, he sits up, wrapping his arms comfortingly around himself. Time ticks away quickly, and as soon as he turns to check the clock he flies off the couch, darting to his room to change and grab his bag. He's going to

be super late to the movie. *Shit, shit, shit.*

The boy leaves the empty house, hopping into his shoe as he races down the driveway and onto his bike. He wraps his fingers tightly around the handles, still shaking from the nightmare. *It's not real*, he reminds himself. *It's okay.*

He hops off his bike, breathing in the summer breeze that washes over him, and tries to shake off the jitters before strolling through the doors of the mall. It takes a few minutes of wandering through affectionate teens and rowdy kids to find Lucas and Max, waiting.

"You're getting worse than Mike, man," Lucas says, sucking on a milkshake.

Will finally feels himself breathe, as his friend offers a distraction from his thoughts. He glances around with squinted eyes. "Funny, I don't see him here."

"Fine. You're *almost* as bad as him."

"Almost as bad as who?"

Will spins on his heel, tilting his head tauntingly. "Ah, speak of the devil."

Mike's expression softens at Will, but he rolls his eyes. "Yeah, very

funny, man.”

“You’re *late* ,” Lucas interrupts, arms flying up in frustration.

“Sorry--”

“ *Again* .”

Will adds quietly, “We’re gonna miss the opening.”

“Well, yeah, if you guys keep whining about it! Let’s go.”

Lucas and Mike dart ahead, Lucas beginning with, “Let me guess. You were busy,” and he makes some kissing noises that make Will cringe and giggle simultaneously.

Mike, on the defense as always, says, “Yeah, real mature Lucas.”

““Oh, El, I wish we could make out forever and never hang out with *any* of our friends.””

“Lucas, stop.” Max stomps up next to her boyfriend, shooting a tired glare in his direction.

The boy just chuckles. “Will thinks it’s funny.”

“Because it is!” Will adds on, laughter bubbling from his chest.

Mike glances back at him, eyes sweeping across his face, and sighs a little bit. He turns away too quickly to address Will’s confusion. “Yeah, it’s so funny that I want to spend romantic time with my girlfriend.”

Will’s eyes almost stay in the back of his head from how hard he rolls them. He mumbles something along the lines of, “Yeah, we get it,” that is luckily overpowered by Lucas’s defensive response.

“I’m spending romantic time with my girlfriend!” Lucas’s arm circles her shoulders, and Will falls to the back, trying not to look to mokey by himself.

“Oh, *whatever* , Lucas.”

Will takes his usual spot between Mike and Max, tossing sodas and candy bars to Lucas as the former two reach into his bag. Max snags her usual Pepsi and M&Ms with a gentle ‘thank you’ in his ear, and then leans over to her boyfriend, excitedly rambling about something as the movie starts.

Before Will gets too distracted by the beginning, Mike leans into his shoulder, whispering, “Hey, I brought something for you.”

“Oh?” Will says, eyebrows dancing in the light from the film. He shifts closer to Mike so as to not distract the people around them. “What a nice surprise, Michael. For once, I shall be pampered.”

Mike chuckles through his nose and whips out Will’s favorite--chocolate covered pretzels with Reese’s Pieces mixed in--from his vest pocket. On holiday breaks and big game nights, they used to mix big bowls together to snack on for the crazy sugar rush and crash that would follow. Will cracks a smile at the fond memories flooding in.

“Alright, Byers. Does this make up for my previous slacking?”

“Hmm,” Will hums. He traps Mike with eye contact, butterflies dancing in his stomach as the boy meets him with a grin, and snatches the bag from his hand. He pops a pretzel in his mouth before continuing. “I’ll keep you posted.”

Mike fondly rolls his eyes and pulls back against his seat, stealing one more glance at a beaming Will.

Mere minutes into the movie, the lights snap off, leaving the theater in intense darkness. Will buzzes beneath his skin, gripping the armrests for stability. His eyes slam shut and he senses it.

“Woah, what happened?” Mike murmurs next to him, fingers grazing the back of his hand.

Will can't answer. When he opens his eyes, the seats around him are empty, and the theater is doused in damp shadows, particles floating in his vision. As his breathing becomes shuddering, and a sob threatens to break through his silence, he swallows hard and searches frantically for an exit. Anywhere to hide. Shrill, crackling sounds of electricity and deep rumbling infiltrate his consciousness.

Okay , he tells himself, okay, breathe. Find a way out.

Even in the darkness, in the confusion of consciousness he faces, he can feel the sensation of Mike's hand gripping his wrist tightly. He focuses on that with everything he has.

The lights in the room slowly flicker back on, the movie reel starts spinning behind them, and as things return to normal a sickening chill travels down his spine, raising gooseflesh on his neck. His arm flies up, trembling fingers pressing into the skin, memories of a cold so intense that it brought him to the brink of death flooding in. He doesn't close his eyes or even look to his sides, afraid of breaking through the fabric of this secure, warm reality.

The movie's sound starts again, and it's so loud, so goddamn loud that Will braces against his seat and prepares to run.

"Hey, Will? Will, are you okay?"

The world melts to safety.

Will relaxes and drops his hand, exhaling as he gazes over at Mike, the boy's face illuminated by the screen.

"Are you okay?" Mike leans across the armrest, close to Will's face, far closer than he usually dared. Tentatively, Will nods, his uneasy eyes drifting down to Mike's lips, chapped and stained from his busy work with El.

Mike's furrows his brow and leans in a bit further. "Are you sure?" His hand tightens over Will's on the armrest as he scans his face carefully. "We can leave if you need to, Will. I'll take you home."

Will's stomach twists inside and out at the gentleness of Mike's words. As he keeps his eyes trained on Mike, the boy who always keeps him safe, he feels everything washing away until it's just the two of them. He can breathe. He can let go.

"Of course, Mike. I'm okay."

Mike stares at him for a few moments longer and Will's cheeks are absolutely ablaze under his attention, and then the boy nods. "Okay." As he pulls away, he mutters, "Just let me know if you need to leave, alright? The others can stay if they want."

"Alright." Will nods and offers a small smile, then turns back to the screen.

Mike links his fingers between Will's and squeezes for reassurance.

Hidden in the darkness, Will burns a bright red. And he gathers the courage to squeeze back.

Notes for the Chapter:

hey! hope you liked this (shorter) chapter. i just wanted to say that i'll likely have the next chapter out tomorrow, but i will be starting school full-time this week. that's not to say i won't update--i have plans in store and i'm already working on future chapters!!--but it might be slightly less frequent. ty for understanding <3

6. Max

Summary for the Chapter:

“Like me?” El’s brows furrow, and Max’s heart breaks open as the curiosity in her voice works its way in.

“Yeah,” she responds fondly, unable to keep the smile out of her voice. “Not Hopper, not Mike...you.”

The girl breaks into such a sweet smile that Max is sure she could hold the whole world in her hands.

Notes for the Chapter:

tumblr: @lesbian-hopper :-)

Max is frozen in her stance as El stomps up to her, skateboard in hand.

Aside from the holidays, and occasionally as an accessory to Mike (Max gags as she thinks about it), she never sees El. She’s always locked up in Hopper’s hideaway cabin. And, apparently, El’s father has never taken her to get anything but baggy flannels, she realizes as she sizes up the girl’s attire.

She’s not sure *why* El would ever choose to come to *her* house upon leaving the cabin--the most exciting interaction they’ve had since the holidays was over a zit (which somehow makes Max flustered when she thinks about it, but that’s beside the point), and as much as she’d like to, she’s not sure they qualify as friends.

“Hey.”

“Hey?”

“Can we talk?”

Max searches her face for any kind of sign of resentment, wondering if anything happened between them that could have set El off. Seemingly, she just needs advice. Comfort, maybe.

“Of course.”

El nods, frowning at the ground in some apparent frustration. “Are you okay?”

“Huh?”

“You fell.”

“Nothing new,” Max teases, referring to when El flung her from the board the year previous--but she frequently falls by herself anyway, not that anyone needed to know. She kicks up her legs to check her knees. “See, I’m fine. So tell me what’s up with you.”

“He’s a piece of shit!” Max exclaims. The more El goes on about the situation, the more her blood boils. The thought of Mike lying to El after everything she’s done for them is something Max cannot

fathom--consider it her unwavering loyalty, but she's about ready to storm over to the boy's house and chew him out herself.

"What?" El asks innocently, looking up at Max with a pained look on her face.

"Mike doesn't have jack shit to do today, and his Nana obviously isn't sick." She sucks in a quivering breath, her own boyfriend crossing her mind. "I guarantee you, he and Lucas are playing Atari right now."

"But friends don't lie."

"Yeah, well, boyfriends lie. All. The time." She plops down in front of El on the bed, ignoring what she feels when their knees brush. "You're going to stop calling him. You're going to ignore his calls." The girl's eyes widen as she bounces from impact. "As far as you're concerned, he doesn't exist."

"Doesn't exist?" El leans in so close that Max's heartbeat increases tenfold.

"He treated you like garbage," she emphasizes the final word, passion flickering in her chest. "You're gonna treat him like garbage. Give him a taste of his own medicine."

The brunette nods. "Give him the medicine," she repeats hesitantly.

“Mhm,” Max affirms. “And if he doesn’t fix this, if he doesn’t explain himself...dump his ass!”

The girl’s eyes go wide, and Max feels like she’s on fire, burning with her new dedication to showing El a good day.

Max will likely never get over the exhilaration of taking El on her first shopping trip.

First of all, she can’t believe that Hopper *never* took her out to get anything other than ratty old flannels, but, whatever. She takes the girl’s hand--she’s pretty sure *that* excitement will never get old--and runs to the first clothing store she sees.

As they make their way through the layers of decorated fabric, Max trails her hands along a few items, holding them up for size, but ultimately follows El until the girl stops in front of a display. Her eyes dazzle as she looks up at the shirt.

“Do you like that?”

El turns to her, an unsure look on her face. “How do I know what *I* like?”

Max raises an eyebrow, a plethora of questions about El’s relationships and interests and preferences and *everything* absolutely

soaring through her mind, but she smiles through it. “You just try things on until you find something that feels like you.”

“Like me?” El’s brows furrow, and Max’s heart breaks open as the curiosity in her voice works its way in.

“Yeah,” she responds fondly, unable to keep the smile out of her voice. “Not Hopper, not Mike...you.”

The girl breaks into such a sweet smile that Max is sure she could hold the whole world in her hands.

Max does everything she can to ignore the way she feels like she’s floating and how easily El makes her laugh as she watches El reduce herself to hilarity and giggling. She’s rarely seen the girl smile, let alone laugh; any time they were with the boys she was stoic and tended to hide behind Mike. Now, she’s radiating something amazing all by herself, and Max is thrilled to witness.

And she succeeds in her silent mission until El starts spinning, spinning happily in front of the mirror, spinning until she literally falls into Max’s arms. It’s the closest they’ve ever been, and Max likes the feeling of El in her arms more than she would care to ever admit out loud.

Max chuckles quietly near her ear, and is met with just as much from El, who turns her head just enough and then she’s inches away. Centimeters. Max clears her throat and helps the girl stand, and

they're both reduced to more laughter, for different reasons this time.

Max can see that her face is burning in the mirror, so she ducks her head down by El's shoulder. "You like that one, huh?"

El chuckles, face breaking into a grin because she doesn't care if she looks silly like everyone else. She just cares that she's having fun. "It's so funny," she breathes, choking on air. "Do you like it?"

Max freezes for a moment, caught up in the view of them in the mirror, in how sweet El looks. "Yeah," she answers. "I like it a lot. I've liked all of them, though, so it's up to you."

El leans into a pose, clearly amused at her reflection in the mirror, and Max is unbelievably whipped. "I think I want to keep trying!"

Max just laughs and nods. She leans against the wall, rests her head, and covers her face as she tries to push down her swelling feelings.

Later on, they agree--they *need* to do a cheesy photoshoot. Max helps El put a little bit of makeup on, tracing the girl's lips with the gloss. She looks up into her eyes once she's done.

"Gorgeous!" she exclaims, pulling back swiftly as she screws the lid back on.

El peers back at her. "You too."

Max clears her throat, brushes at her clothes to get any wrinkles out, and smiles tentatively. "Okay, ready? We have to pose."

El nods, beaming.

They make silly faces at the camera, posing with their hands around their faces in a dramatic 'Vogue' fashion. In one picture, El leans on Max's shoulders from behind, throwing her head back with a model smile. Max has the wind knocked from her, and she glances back skittishly before smiling through her nerves.

When they're finished, they continue on a mission to have El try everything fun Max can think of. The girl clings to Max's forearms as she attempts to stroll in some heels, but it ends with them both on the ground caught in a fit of giggles. They sabotage Stacy's drink, because Max told El about how she'd tried to embarrass her in P.E. the other day, and El immediately focuses all her energy on getting back at her. Max, perhaps flattered that El is so defensive over her, watches with glee bubbling in her chest.

"Ice cream?" Max suggests. El just tilts her head in confusion, and Max nods. "Okay, for sure then. You have to try it."

A matter of minutes later, Steve spins around with their cones in his hands.

“Hey, are you even allowed to be here?” he asks with a concerned look, when he finally snaps out of his daze and realizes that El is *here* in the *mall* with *people* .

El’s face brightens with mischief, and coupled with the new ice cream mustache, Max can’t come up with any words to respond. The smiling, El’s eyes glowing, her new outfit fitting to her snugly--it’s all colliding with Max’s brain and she short-circuits. El is in the driver’s seat, and she just laughs and runs away, so Max follows.

“Wanna trade?” Max asks, licking her cone as she helps El carry her bags out of the mall.

El smiles at her yet again, nodding and handing hers over. Everything is fitting so perfectly, falling into place so well, and for those few hours, Max was able to forget about everything bad in her life. She hopes that she could help El forget as well.

That is, until they run into the boys.

“Isn’t this a nice surprise?”

Mike’s face twists into such disgust that Max puffs out her chest in defense, because El looks beautiful. She’s delightful and funny when Mike isn’t dictating her personality. And he’s willing to shit on that with his expression, with his lack of comment on the cute outfit.

“What are you doing here?”

A beat. “Shopping.” El’s face has already fallen, crumpled into something between defeat and rage.

“This is her new style,” Max butts in, wanting to leave it to El, but she just *has* to. She has to be there to lean on, so that El can smile again. “What do you think?”

Mike turns to her, almost twitching with apparent shock at being caught. “What’s wrong with you? You know she’s not allowed to be here.”

“What is she, your little pet?” Max cocks her head just enough to be smug, but she poses it as a genuine question.

El glances her way, then carries on. “Yeah, am I your pet?”

“What?” Mike sputters. “No.”

El doesn’t give him time for another comment. “Then why do you treat me like garbage?”

“ *What ?*”

“You said Nana was sick?”

“She is! She is sick.” Max can see Mike internally scrambling for an explanation.

Fortunately for him, apparently, her own boyfriend chimes in to distract. “That’s why we’re here, actually.”

“Yeah, we’re shopping for her. For Nana.” Mike nods urgently. “Also we’re here to get a gift for you. Just, we couldn’t find anything that suited you and I only have like \$3.50 so it’s hard.”

Max resists the urge to snap at him, to ask if he’d ever even *asked* what El liked and if maybe that’s why he couldn’t find anything. Because he didn’t actually *know* . It took Max a matter of two hours to find out what El enjoyed. It took two hours to introduce her to the idea of her own identity and it makes Max shake with rage that no one ever tried to help her over the course of so many months.

Once again, Lucas says something before it can get any worse. “Really hard.”

El’s face deflates even more. “You lie.” Mike’s face contorts even worse, into something that resembles...fear. Fear of his own *girlfriend* . “Why do you lie?”

Mike takes in a deep breath, looking way too shocked that El even has her own voice to answer.

“I dump your ass.”

Time stands still. Mike and Lucas drop their jaws slightly in shock, eyes widening past a normal human range.

But Max notices the boy in the back, standing alone, perhaps a small smile on his face, and whether it's the adrenaline of the moment or how sick she is of seeing him alone, she shouts, “Hey, Will! You should come with us to the arcade, or something. It's gonna be super fun.”

Will, apparently panicked at the call-out, nods quickly. “Okay!”

Max smiles. “Just call me.” She shoots a look at Lucas for siding with Mike, though wildly unshocked by the boyish behavior, and takes off running hand-in-hand with El to catch the bus. And then the girl is giggling again, leaning into Max's personal space with a smile worthy of the stars.

Really, life couldn't get any better.

Notes for the Chapter:

~it's the start of something new~

hey, so i'm updating this a lot later than usual because i had a busy day--but i promise i'll get to any comments/etc asap!! on that note, thank you all so much for reading, i genuinely can't express how much i appreciate it. have a lovely day/evening and please feel free to leave kudos or comment with any

feedback that you have, i cherish it v much. <33

7. Will

Summary for the Chapter:

Max raises an eyebrow. “Can I tell you what I think?”

“By all means.”

A shared, deep breath. “You’re in love with him.”

Notes for the Chapter:

tumblr: @lesbian-hopper

Max’s invitation rattled Will, and he must admit that he’d never expected to hang out with the girls alone, but they shaped the most fun day he’s had in *forever* . The thing is, these two actually did things they *all* liked; Max and Will introduced El to the arcade and created a championship game that they intend to finish in the coming week, they stopped for ice cream, and now they’re walking El home, all taunting each other over high scores and laughing.

The trio’s feet crunch through sticks and fallen leaves on the forest floor as they approach the Hoppers’ cabin.

“Thanks for walking me,” El says, voice brighter than Will remembers it ever being.

Max smiles. “I’ll be back later, okay? I’m just gonna walk Will home.”

Will didn't notice them holding hands until El squeezes Max's, then backs toward the door.

"It was nice seeing you, Will," she says. Through the shaky voice and uneasy eye contact, he can tell that El genuinely means it. She even tries for a small smile.

Previous strongholds of jealousy ebb away, and he's promptly overcome with guilt. Since the moment she appeared in the Upside Down, an angel in the fuzzy haze of his memory, a connection has bound them together like a second heartbeat--incredibly hard to ignore.

It's too complicated for him; he can't say he's over the jealousy, it's too fresh. But he wants to be.

"You too." He returns the awkward smile, then bounces down the steps to give the girls some privacy--and to catch his own breath. He really, *really* wants to skip past all the awkward ' *hi* ' s and uncomfortable silences and just be friends like they're meant to be, but it's hard when all he can think of is El and Mike hugging, kissing, lingering...

Max catches up with him in seconds. They walk silently for quite a distance through the woods, side-by-side, until Max speaks up.

"Hey, I had a lot of fun today. We should hang out again."

Will looks up from his distracting game of kicking up leaves and balancing them on his feet. "Me, too. It was the most fun I've had in a minute."

"Yeah." She slows down her pace. "Uh, hey, I've been meaning to ask. Are things with you and Mike okay?"

Will's heart freezes. If something was off, something was there before; his cover could be blown. Right? Or maybe he's just overthinking it.

"What do you mean?"

She presses her lips tight and looks to the ground before answering. "I just--I know you guys are really close. And things seem normal at the movies, but other than that... you just seem more distant than I remember. I don't know."

In the privacy of the woods, with this girl who saw that he didn't want to spend another day with the boys doing boring bullshit, who he's petrified can see *him*, he considers spilling what's been tormenting him for years now.

"I don't know. He's with El a lot, and they're really...involved," the words settle on his tongue like poison. "It's fine."

"Yeah." She nods, and he begins to wonder if maybe she understands that it's too much for words. "Hey, can I tell you something? I don't

have anyone else to talk to about it.”

“Sure?”

He doesn't look over because he can tell that she's having a moment, perhaps of resignation, and she takes in a nervous breath that he pretends not to hear. “You can't tell anyone.”

“I won't. Promise.”

Max shakes her jittery hands, looking everywhere but at Will. “Okay,” she breathes to the top of the trees, “I have a crush on El.”

Will's world as he knows it ceases. “*What?*” It's impossible that anyone could *feel* like him. It's impossible to be like that, or to even *emulate* it *slightly* without getting the shit pummeled out of you. Hell, Will was harassed for acting gay before he knew anything was *wrong*, so he'd drilled it into his own head that he couldn't be the *fucking fag* that everyone called him. He made himself unwelcome in his own body.

Or maybe the world did it for him.

“Please don't hate me, Will.”

“No, I don't, Max,” he murmurs. Everything whizzes around his mind in a confusing, dizzy daze. “Um, but Lucas...”

In his moments of utter puzzlement, he didn't realize that she started crying; her eyes spill over with tears and her lip wobbles as she glances over at him.

"Don't tell him. Please," she whispers and clears her throat. "I'm going to. I don't want to hurt him, he's my best friend." And then sobs are wracking her body and Will is walking in her steps with her, feeling with her. "I love him, I really do. And I don't want to hurt him, but I can't ignore what I feel when I'm with her."

"What do you feel?"

She looks up at him, fully looks at him without fear of him seeing her tears. In that moment, for the first time, she seems unafraid, like she can trust these words to stay in their own little bubble.

And, surprisingly, she smiles. Sniffles, then smiles again.

"I just...she looks at me a certain way, and I get so excited--like I'm buzzing. I know she's just being friendly, but she keeps holding my hand and touching me, and it's like those butterflies people talk about in the movies." She chuckles a little bit and wipes her nose. "When she smiles...it's like I can feel myself falling, you know? It's electric..." she snaps out of a dreamy oblivion. "Do you ever get that way?"

Will is launched back to quiet whispers in movie theaters, thick silences following gentle touches to his thigh, fingers interlocking

with his own, when he thought he might never find words again.
“Yeah. I do.”

The girl nods. “It’s like that,” she whispers. “I’ve--I think I’ve had a crush on her since I met her. Literally. I just didn’t know how to place that feeling, but when I thought about it...”

A corner of Will’s mouth turns up. “You did blush a lot on Christmas Eve, you know, when she wanted you to change clothes or whatever--so romantic, by the way--”

Max whips her head in his direction, jaw dropped. “Hey! She didn’t want me to catch a *cold* , that’s super thoughtful.” He smiles teasingly, so she looks down with the corners of her mouth turned up just slightly. “Whatever, I thought it was really sweet. And she called me pretty. Multiple times!”

“It is , it is sweet, Max.”

The ginger stops and leans against a tree, wipes her nose, and turns to Will with a gentle smirk. “So, you gonna tell me what’s going on with Mike now that I’ve poured my heart out to you?”

Will shrugs into himself. “I don’t really know. Nothing I guess.” To her doubtful look, he continues, “Well, he’s with El. And he’s--it’s--nothing could ever happen, Max. It’s not even a real feeling. It can’t be.” He dances around all of his statements, carefully speaking their own hidden language.

“Why couldn’t it be?” She sinks down against the trunk, drawing her knees to her chest.

“What do you mean?”

Max raises an eyebrow. “Can I tell you what I think?”

“By all means.”

A shared, deep breath. “You’re in love with him.”

It’s like the sky is falling and the ground is collapsing beneath his feet, holding him in a gentle cocoon shielded from the real world. It’s safe in this one little spot, to ponder this thought, this *maybe* that’s prodded at his head since they were twelve. To consider what he would feel if he *could* , if he were allowed to do that, if Mike would ever *maybemaybemaybe* reciprocate. If that would ever be okay.

Will bites his lip, head pounding from tears that threaten to ruin his composure. “I don’t--I--so what?”

Max looks at him, eyes gentler than anyone else’s he knows--except maybe his mom--and then says, “He loves you too.”

Will scoffs and wipes a thumb along the few tears that managed to escape. “There’s a big difference between *love* and *in love* , Max.”

“Yeah, well,” she does this thing where she bites her lip and looks around, like she’s spaced out but deep in thought, “maybe he doesn’t know. It might take him a lot longer than you and I. I mean, look at his family.” Max picks up a twig and tosses it at his shoe, chuckling a bit when she lands it, and Will doesn’t mean to smile but it’s ridiculous how she’s still choked up with tears but *laughing* . “But you definitely have his love, Will.”

Without meaning to, Will sighs.

“That’s more than El has.”

The boy’s head shoots up. “ *What* ? She’s his girlfriend!”

“I mean, in a way, he *does* love her. He cares for her. But he hardly knows her, Will.” She flicks an eyebrow upward and peers at him. “They just...kiss. They don’t talk much. But he *knows* you, and it’s like...she gets the physical side of things and you get his...sweet side.”

“You mean his friend side?”

“His *boyfriend* side.” She crosses her arms. “Does he treat me like that? Or Dustin? Lucas? Come on, man.”

The pounding in his head gets stronger and his jaw sets. “I don’t think he means it like that.”

“Maybe not,” she shrugs, “but you shouldn’t let him do that to you. Or her.”

The sun hangs heavy in the sky next to them, casting long shadows of trees by their feet. Both stay silent for a while, appreciating each other’s company--in not being alone.

“Thanks, Max.”

“What?”

“For telling me,” he says, and he means it. It’s been a while since he didn’t feel alone. “Nobody has ever talked to me about this kind of thing without using some pretty ugly language. It’s nice that you’re being so normal about it.”

Max nods and rests her tainted cheeks against her fists. “Ditto. We can be in this together, okay?”

It’s Will’s turn to nod. “Can I tell you something now?”

“Sure.”

“I think El likes you too.”

Max smiles wistfully, flushing deeply across her pale face. “Come on, I better get you to Mike’s before the boys start to freak out.”

As soon as she’s gone, Will misses Max. He balances himself on the arm of Mike’s couch, the boy resting against a pillow next to him, listening as his friends drone on and on about what could possibly be going through the girl’s heads. The longer they go on, the more Will screams and shouts, *try talking to them, idiots* . But never out loud. In fact, he says nothing.

He glances up at the clock later, eyes heavy with fatigue, and figures there’s no chance of D&D tonight. The other two stay distracted for a while, occasionally asking Will to weigh in. He remains vague, not wanting to encourage or upset them.

Eventually, Lucas passes out on the recliner, clinging to a small blanket. Will is stuck on the ground for a while, sitting by the head of the couch that Mike inhabits. As his eyes gain more weight, his head falling to the side just to shock back up as he dozes off, he considers moving somewhere more comfortable to sleep.

Until he realizes that Mike is awake.

“Will?”

A hand reaches his shoulder and causes him to start.

There's a moment where he knows he has to bring his guard up. He has to keep himself and his stupid little secret safe, because there's no way that Mike Wheeler would ever think of him the same.

"Yeah?"

"Look at me."

Will turns slowly. He rests his chin on the couch cushion and gazes at a sleepy Mike, looking at Will with his eyes crinkled into a sleepy smile.

He drops his guard.

"There we go," Mike whispers. "You know, you have pretty eyes."

Will stops breathing. "Shut up, Mike."

"No, you do." The boy reaches out nimble fingers and brushes a few stray hairs from his forehead, and Will knows something, maybe fatigue, must be confusing him. He must be seeing El—their resemblance had been pointed out often enough. Either way, Will is overwhelmed with thoughts of *I love you* and *I can't*. "Pretty hazel eyes."

"Mike, I think you're a little tired."

“They kinda look like almonds.”

“Or shit.”

Mike scrunches his nose and smooshes his face in the pillow, laughing. “Gross, that’s not true.”

Will shakes his head and lets out a sound of amusement. “I think I like yours more.”

“Pfft, mine don’t compare.”

And despite his anxiety moments before, Will finds himself laughing. “Don’t say that.”

“Mm. Agree to disagree.”

“Deal.” Will, against his better judgment, extends his arm to briefly pick at the ends of Mike’s hair, strands that curl just slightly. The boy lets out a noise of ease that terrifies Will. “Why do you keep straightening your hair?”

Mike groans, crumpling his face against his hand on the couch. “The curls are too much. You know what people said when I let my hair go...”

“Who cares what people say?”

Mike looks at him again with droopy eyes and a smile so sweet that Will thinks he might die right then. “Yeah, who cares?”

A teeny, tiny part of his brain wonders and wishes that Mike meant it. He clears his throat and turns around, staring at the carpet.

“Goodnight, Will,” Mike yawns, his voice small, and he offers a smile before immediately falling asleep. As the minutes drag along, Will allows himself to peek, and sees the boy with parted red lips and his arm draped across Will’s chest.

“Night, Mike.”

Hazel . Mike said *hazel*. Will’s eyes filter between brown and green constantly, landing in the pool of *hazel* more often than not. But El, El’s eyes are distinctly brown. Solid. Clear. Wide and curious.

And Mike said *hazel*.

Mike complimented *his* eyes. Which was totally normal.

Will stares at the ceiling, a stupidly giddy expression bleeding into

his pillow. He's running on the few hours of sleep he could manage and pure excitement, but he gets up earlier than the others and sneaks to the bathroom to change.

In his bag is a costume, a vibrant purple cloak and pointy wizard hat that his mother had helped sew. The attire of the powerful Will the Wise.

Stepping out of the bathroom with a refined flourish, he grabs a stereo and the music he'd been planning for this campaign.

Then, with a breath for courage, he slams it down to effectively wake the others, and begins his speech.

It's hard, but Will ignores the mockery that his friends subject him to as they finally play. It's hard, but he brushes off the apathy from Mike that leaves a pit in his stomach. It's hard, it's hard, it's hard, until Will just drops it. He's tired of getting his hopes up. Mike and Lucas can have a fun day making calls without him.

A slew of apologies are thrown his way, 'I was just messing around' and 'We still wanna play,' but it doesn't matter. His spirit is finally done with it, and it's confirmed for him that they'll never go back to the way they were. He's losing them.

He pushes past Lucas, fiery pain and anger rolling through him like a tide, and all he has to do is make it to his bike and go home and then he won't cry in front of anyone. And he can think it out from there.

“Will, come on. You can’t leave. It’s raining.” Will messes around with his bag to have something else to look at, to ignore the one voice he wants to hear.

“Listen, I said I was sorry, alright? It’s a cool campaign, it’s really cool. We’re just not in the mood right now.”

The tide steals another victim. “Yeah, Mike! That’s the problem. You guys are never in the mood anymore. You’re ruining our party!” Will shakes and every breath burns heavy in his chest.

“That’s not true!” Mike exclaims.

“Really? Where’s Dustin right now?” The boy’s mouth drops open, floundering briefly with a quiet, ‘Will..’ before pressing back together. “See? You don’t know, and you don’t even care, and obviously he doesn’t either and I don’t blame him. You’re destroying everything, and for what, so you can swap spit with some stupid girl?”

Mike looks flustered for the first time in the whole back-and-forth, sputtering, “El’s not stupid! It’s not my fault you don’t like girls.”

In one second, Will loses the boy who used to protect him against bullies, who held his hand through every scrape and bloody nose he accrued over the years. In one second his best friend turns into his father, and every passing moment stings harder than the last. His eyes swell with tears and the anger that carried him before might give out if he moves. All he can do is stare.

Mike looks at him as if one of them might break in the next few moments. He might be right. "I'm not trying to be a jerk--"

"Yeah, well, you're not doing too great with that one, Mike."

The boy's face falls. "We're not kids anymore, Will," he pleads with him, but Will can't do it anymore. "What did you think? That we were just gonna sit in my basement all day and play games for the rest of our lives? We were never gonna get girlfriends?"

"Yeah." Will presses his mouth into a line. He can't take Mike's words back, and he can't deny that Mike was always in his future. He always had a spot in his life, and Will thought he'd always choose to be there. And he'd be there back. "I guess I did."

He hops on his bike, ignoring Mike's calls to not leave. Ignoring his attempt to bring Will back. He just pedals as fast as he can away from the pain and heaviness of his past.

"Will?"

A jolly-looking, plump man calls from outside his house, rolling down his van window. Real-estate service painted across the side. The rain batters the man's face immediately.

Will slows to a tentative stop, staring at the man he recognized from town, but that he never figured he'd have to talk to past a polite 'hello' at the grocery store. He frowns. "Yeah?"

"Your mother around?"

Will looks to the empty driveway, saying a simple, "No."

"Oh. Can you tell her I was here?"

"Sure thing," he spits out.

"Okay." He starts up the van again, engine roaring by Will's face. "Shouldn't you get inside?"

Will stares at the guy, then answers with the quick lie that falls from his mouth, "No, I'm going to meet my brother, actually. I'll be fine."

"Okay kid. Be careful!"

They drive off in opposite directions, Will sobbing until his chest physically aches, clinging to his handlebars until his knuckles are breaking and he shortly follows.

Notes for the Chapter:

hey! please leave kudos/comment with any feedback

you have, i appreciate everything you guys say so so much <3 and thank you for what you have said!! it really keeps me motivated to pursue my ideas for this fic.

unfortunately, i have school and i work(ed) this entire weekend, so i haven't had the ample time to edit like i used to :/ but the next chapter should be up within the next few days!!

8. El

Summary for the Chapter:

“Hey, Max?”

“Yeah?”

“Can, um--” El takes in a breath of courage. “Can you teach me how to kiss? I don’t think I’m doing it right.”

Notes for the Chapter:

tumblr: @lesbian-hopper :D

i call this one... domestic elmax

A low, alluring voice sounds through El’s stereo as she flips through a magazine, familiarizing herself with a new mix of celebrity faces. Max bounces and sings along next to her; she has a very pretty voice as well, smooth and excitable, but she maintains a low level that makes it difficult for El to hear much of the time.

You’re an angel. I can see it in your eyes...

El stops on a page with a handsome boy with a sweet, pliable face and tender dark eyes. He’s fresh-faced and sweet-looking, and El trails the tips of her fingers along his photo, trying to memorize the odd charm she finds in it. Maybe she would like kissing *him* , with his plumpish red lips and soft features.

“Ohh, you found Ralph Macchio,” Max says, wiggling her eyebrows. She stops her sing-along to balance herself on the edge of the bed and look up at El, radiating something bright and airy.

El raises an eyebrow, amused. "Macchio?"

"Yeah! He's the Karate Kid. Hai-yah!" Max giggles. "He's so hot, right? I bet he's an amazing kisser, too."

El looks at her, a teasing scowl playing on her face, saying a silent, *Really ?*

"Hey, uh..." Max gingerly sits in front of her on the bed. "Is Mike a good kisser?"

El sighs and tries to play it off with light laughter. All she can think of is how bored she is of their frequent making out, and Max's excitement at the prospect of kissing tells her that she should feel something more. "I don't know," she finally answers. "He's my first boyfriend."

"Ah," Max says quietly.

El looks up at her, friendly blue eyes and a smile meeting her gaze. And she uses this moment to take in how pretty her ginger hair looks waterfaling down her shoulders, pretty thighs and soft hands resting near her own. She really notices Max, and in that moment finds it a lot harder to think, talk...

But she gets an idea.

“Hey, Max?”

“Yeah?”

“Can, um--” El takes in a breath of courage. “Can you teach me how to kiss? I don’t think I’m doing it right.”

Max blinks those stunning blue eyes at her, nodding cautiously. “Yeah, sure.” The girl shifts a tad closer to her. “There’s not really right and wrong, but, what do you need to know?”

“Everything, I guess.”

“Okay.” Max wipes her hands on her jean shorts and smiles a smile so pretty that El swoons, her eyes dashing across the ginger’s face. “So, uh, you’ll want to be close to the other person.”

El shoves the magazine out of the way and crawls to be closer to Max, who moves at the same time, and then they’re nose-to-nose, and El’s heartbeat is pounding in her ears, a nervous laugh falling from her lips.

Max swallows and chuckles. “That works. So, once you’re here, remember to tilt your head so that you don’t bump noses like we just did.”

“Okay.” El tilts her head to the right and Max does the same from her position.

“Good. So, let’s say you start out holding hands,” Max links her fingers between El’s, “since that’s romantic. You’re gonna wanna think about how you want to lean in to your partner--this depends on the moment, but a good way is to put your hand on their cheek to pull them in.” El glances down with a timid breath and flushing cheeks as Max takes her hand and slides it into place against her cheekbone.

And it is *exhilarating* . A thrill that El can only liken to that of a jumpscare in a movie, but in a really good way. One that has the hairs on the back of her neck standing up, her heartbeat absolutely pounding against her ribcage. The girl in front of her is quiet, an anxious smile present in the thin proximity they share, and in a fleeting moment El slips her hand into the girl’s hair--just out of pure curiosity.

That’s where they stay. Trembling, interlocked fingers clinging to each other for support, knees brushing, a gentle fist in Max’s hair. The girl’s breath against El’s lips.

El clears her throat. “Nice,” she mutters. “A-anything else?”

Max breathes in shakily. El feels it against her abdomen. “Yeah, well, then you lean in and go from there. Just do what feels good for you.”

It’s silent, nervous glances and blaring lyrics of *Crazy For You* and uneasy chuckles until El takes a breath and leans in--unfortunately,

Max pulls away too frantically for El to get her practice in.

“Yeah, that’s--that’s good.” Max pulls back and sits cross-legged on the bed. “So, uh--wow, why am I so warm?” The girl presses the back of her hand on her crimson cheeks and clears her throat. “Use those tips with your future boyfriend.”

El, who was previously soaring through constellations in her mind, sighs as she remembers Mike. *Mike* . She isn’t sure how to express what she wants from him, how she feels. She cares deeply for him and wants him to be happy, but she doesn’t feel like kissing him anymore. In fact, she wants to lean back in to Max right about now and test out new waters, but the other girl is too far away.

“Or Mike,” Max adds gently. “Hey, don’t worry about it, okay? He’ll come crawling back to you in no time, begging for forgiveness. I guarantee you, him and Lucas are, like, totally wallowing in self-pity and misery right now. They’re like, ‘Oh, I hope they take us back.’” Without warning, El’s face crinkles into a laugh, so Max pauses and chuckles with her. “God, what I wouldn’t give to see their stupid faces.”

El’s eyebrow flies upward, and *hell, yeah* , she’ll do this if it’s what Max wants.

In a matter of minutes, with the radio crackling and Max sitting on the bed in front of her, El is wrapping a blindfold around her head and taking in a deep breath.

“Is this really gonna work? Holy shit, this is crazy, I--”

“Max.”

“Sorry!”

El settles back into her position and dimensions blend into one. When she snaps her eyes open, she sees black. She sees Mike, Lucas, and Will, sitting around and talking about the girls like they are *other* .

Species.

From the few phrases she picks up on and repeats, it's obvious that the guys are saying some offensive things--Max is *pissed* . But then, Lucas lets out a disturbing sound and El can't hold it in anymore; she falls to the ground in a fit of amusement and Max eventually sidles up next to her, giggling and shouting ‘ *What?!* ’ and El can't stop laughing long enough to answer. The girl falls next to her on the ground, a magnificent laugh mirroring her own.

“Wait.” Max sits abruptly. “If you can spy on them, you can spy on anyone, right?”

“Spying? Isn't that against the rules?”

A beat. “We make our own rules.”

El lifts the corner of her mouth, watching carefully as Max scribbles down names of people in their lives, jumping up to sit on the comfortable bed rather than the floor.

A wheel containing the list of names falls in front of her face. “Okay,” Max begins, “give it a try.”

“El! El, I’m sure it’s fine, he didn’t really see you. How could he?”

It still feels like someone just dropped spikes of ice down her spine, like someone is right in the crevices of her mind and staring into her soul. Like a stringent, icy claw has yanked into her very being.

Billy’s eyes on her. Seeing *through* her. Dangerous.

“I-I don’t know.” She hugs her own knees, pulling herself into a ball to brush off the frigidity. “A connection?”

Max moves to sit in front of her, resting her forearms on El’s knees. “But, Will never sees you, and he was possessed, right?”

El silently thanks Max for the warmth radiating between them. “I don’t know... we should try to find Billy. Something is wrong.”

“Okay. Let’s just sleep on it first, okay? I don’t think your dad would want you out this late and we can rest up for tomorrow.”

Exhale. *It’s okay* . “Alright.”

Everything is, perhaps, not okay. Rain shatters the placidity of the girl’s faces, puddles lap up against their ankles, and El clings to Max as she drives them back from their missions of the day.

It was a confusing day. It was a day filled with confusing, harsh people and violent weather. A day that carried screams and cries all trapped in the confines of El’s mind. It was a harmful day. She *knows* that something is wrong with that girl Heather, she knows that the screams she was hearing were those desperately calling for a, ‘stop!’ rather than...a *finish* . Whatever Max means by that. But despite all of this, everything seemed normal at the girl’s house. Normal, in the sense that they wore pastel sweaters and ate at the table and smiled through every sentence, like a preset emotion for a character. Normal, in that something was really, *really* wrong.

But somehow, after the exhaustion of it all, El finds solace in the girl wrapped up in her arms. Even though the sleek back of her raincoat has El’s face dragging harshly from the friction, and she nearly gets thrown off the back of the bike in the storm, the glowing streetlamps and the wafting scent of the rain and the weight and pressure of being pressed up against *Max* is quite near euphoric.

The girl pulls to a slow stop, and El lowers herself to the ground, swinging a leg off the rod and grounding herself after the long,

dizzying ride.

“Okay,” Max takes her arm as a crutch after the unease that settled around the day, “we call the boys tomorrow. We get a plan and go from there. But tonight, we get some sleep. I’m whipped.”

El nods assertively. “Good plan.”

As they approach the door, and as they enter into a hallway, and as they tread lightly to Max’s room, the girl tightens her grip. She darts her eyes around wildly before closing her bedroom door. Once she lets go, El keeps a careful eye on her, trying to sense whatever threat might even try to harm her.

But Max continues on as normal, dropping her things on the ground and kicking her shoes off. And El watches as she throws off the rain jacket, and then her T-shirt, leaving her in just a tank top that hugs at her waist.

“Oh! Right,” Max hops up from the side of the bed, where she had sat to remove her socks and shoes, and moves to rummage through her dresser. After shoving several articles of clothing around through a mess of hues, she offers a small pile to El. “You can wear these for the night.”

El stands mesmerized by the pale, strong shoulders and chest right in front of her. With shaky hands, she accepts the clothes with a muffled, “Thanks.”

They face opposite directions and change, El forcing her eyes to the floor to reduce the temptation to glimpse--not because she wants to see anything *risqué* , but because the trust in the silence between them is more intense than anything she's ever known; it's small and intimate and El wants to appreciate every second of it with Max.

So, El climbs into bed next to her moments later, once they're both finished.

And she dares to rest her head against Max's chest, a gentle pulsing beat thumping from her heart. The steady, even *thu-thumps* soothe the tension that El holds in her body.

"I'll read you a bedtime story, if you want," Max offers into the quiet that spaces out between them.

El smiles, early memories of Hopper trying his very best to be a fitting father for her drawn back to her. "That would be nice."

Max strains to the side to grab a few items from her bedside table. "Have you heard of Wonder Woman?"

El's eyes dart across the cover of the booklet, the title popping off the page in bold letters, a beautiful and firm-looking woman posed in a power stance.

"Mm, no." She gazes at the lady. "Max? Can girls like girls?"

It's a faint difference, but the girl's *thu-thumping* heart picks up. "Uh, yeah. They can." She breathes in deeply, relaxing the ever-growing pace, and then exhales. "It--that happens. Yeah. But a lot of people don't agree with it."

Though El doesn't fully understand, she scowls and damn near crosses her arms defensively under the covers. "Don't agree? How? Why?"

"It usually goes against their values."

"Values?"

Max's thumb flits through the pages of the book unconsciously. "Yeah. Like, a value that you have is 'friends don't lie.' That's important to you and you live your life with that in mind. It's valuable to you."

"So," El huffs out a breath, her chest constricting, "it's wrong?"

"No." Max's voice comes out so tight, like someone catches hold of her throat and clenches their fingers as she speaks. "It's natural to love anyone. But, some people think very violently against it." She sinks even further into herself. "So you can't tell anyone. That way, other people can stay comfortable, and you don't get hurt."

El hums in somewhat understanding. She doesn't completely comprehend but Max seems to fret because of the question, so she wants to change the subject.

"Max?"

"Huh?"

"What are you so afraid of?"

Th-thump, th-thump, th-thump. "What?"

El sighs, a quiet little breath against the girl's chest. "I saw you when we got here earlier... are you hurt?"

"Oh. No. Nothing will happen to you here, El."

"But you?"

Silence. "No."

El shifts her head to train her eyes on the girl's face, to seek out the truth in this little quest. "Max... you can tell me. I can protect you."

“You—“ Max barks out something like a laugh, running her fist near her eyes to catch a few fallen tears, “you don’t have to, El. I’m okay.”

“I want to.”

Max meets her eyes briefly. And then a swarm of emotions bubbles over from her. “Billy used to hurt me a lot, or threaten to.” She turns her gaze downward and plays with the hem of El’s shirt sleeve. “And that was scary enough. And my stepdad... that’s why Billy did it. I was his target to practice what his father did to him. And, I don’t know,” her face burns bright, her voice clouded with tremors, “I know he hits my mom sometimes now. I never thought he’d cross that line. So when... when does he cross it to me?”

Breaths of rage wrack El’s body, and her eyes are narrowing and she’s prepared to pop out of bed and find this man right now. She’s ready to stand between Max and the man, this threat that’s *nothing* compared to what’s she’s faced before.

Give him the medicine.

Then she notices the girl falling apart beneath her.

Her chest shakes with silent sobs, her face newly tear-stained and twisted into a desperate expression. It tugs and pulls at El’s heart strings until she aches inside.

“Max?”

“Yeah?” It comes out thick.

“I will always protect you. You tell me.”

Max coughs into her arm, eyes watery and breath trembling, but she manages a gentle smile. A tender, quiet expression that could get lost in the crowd until the right person picked up on it and held it close to their heart.

El is determined to be that person.

“Thank you.”

It doesn't take many words. El takes the comic from Max's hands and tosses it back to the small drawers beside the bed, and then twists until she's cradling her. Sharing breaths and wrapping into each other. Fingers locking.

Safe. Secure.

Halfway to happy .

“Mike, stop calling here. I'm sleeping.”

A beat.

“What? Okay. Yes, she’s with me. We’ll see you soon.”

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks for reading!! so, i've realized that i likely won't be able to update more than once a week, what with school and college applications and work. but i'm excited to continue!! thank you so much for leaving feedback, i truly appreciate it. and with that, please leave kudos/comments!! i truly love hearing what you guys have to say <33

edit: also, i realize i left out a lot of this episode, but i also...didn't wanna get sued by the duffer brothers by rewriting literally the entire thing lmao. i really hope that i handled it well!!

p.s.: crazy for you is a certified elmax song i have decided

9. mike

Summary for the Chapter:

“Well, what’s wrong?”

A beat. Slow and dragging and punctuated with laughter. “You terrify me, Byers.”

Notes for the Chapter:

tumblr: @lesbian-hopper

The sky roars into the safe confines of Mike’s basement, sending a terrible chill down Mike’s spine as he launches around the room; searching for a jacket here, mumbling to himself in a panicked, feverish fashion there—all the while Lucas, in an attempt to do the right thing and calm him down, further pushes panic into his heart.

“Let’s just call the girls like we were going to, and then call Will’s and see if he got home. That’s where he said he was going right?”

“Yeah, but what if he crashes along the way? Or something gets him? We gotta go, Lucas—“

“Mike, it’s okay. He just needs to cool off, I don’t think he’d do anything crazy.” After yet another frenzied look from Mike, he sighs. “Fine. Let’s just wait a couple minutes, and think about where we wanna go before we get lost in the storm—“

“No.” Mike finally snatches a sweatshirt from the recliner and shrugs it on. Thunder looming above the house claps so loud that both boys flinch, and Mike sucks in a huffy breath. “No, Lucas, what if he’s heading somewhere instead of home? It’s getting really bad out, he shouldn’t be out there alone.”

Lucas buries his face in his hands. “He’s smart, I think he knows how to find shelter!”

Mike spins on his heel way too fast and falls into a starfish-pose against the back of the couch. “You—you don’t understand. He’s really upset. And you know how he gets,” he lowers his voice, which

threatens to break and betray him, “and I said some really shitty things. We need to go.”

The boy in front of him sighs and resignedly slides into his own jacket. “I don’t think he’ll take D&D that personally.”

“It’s not just D&D!” Mike shouts, each breath heavier in his abdomen, tears pushing against his sinuses. “What if—what if we go out there and he’s gone again? And this time we can’t help? He could get seriously hurt or, or—” his hands come up as instinct to hide his face, “I’d have to live with the fact that he was mad at me. About something that I don’t know if I can make up to him.”

“Okay, okay,” Lucas ends up right in front of him, hands on his shoulders. Despite the boy’s own frustrations, in a careful, tender way, he forces Mike to look up at him; to focus on kind eyes and a reassuring smile. “Okay. Let’s go try his house first, and you can apologize. I need to, too. But don’t worry about it. You guys always talk it out, Mike, it’ll be fine.”

Mike lifts his tongue to the roof of his mouth to stop the flow of tears, and with his eyes trained on the ground, whole body shaking, he asks in an unsteady voice, “And if he’s not home?”

“We’ll find him.”

“Shit!” Mike slides down against the Byers’ front door and drags his nails down his face, pounding a fist on the ground. “Why isn’t he here? He said he was going home! Fuck, dude, I really screwed this up.”

Lucas crouches in front of him. “Mike. Relax. You said it yourself, he might be going somewhere else. And where would he go for alone time...?”

Mike ignores the way his lung collapses, how his heart drops and his stomach churns in an ugly way. “Castle Byers. In the forest, where lightning or God-knows-what could get him. Great.”

“Don’t panic.” Lucas offers his hand out and attempts to give a

reassuring look—admittedly, he looks more apprehensive than before. But he puts up a good front. “Look, I’m worried too. But really, I think he’s okay.”

Mike’s unconvinced.

“Will! Will!” Mike makes a beeline as soon as he sees the boy, sopping wet, standing in front of a destroyed haven.

The boy turns to him and Lucas, who catches up in a few seconds. He takes no time to answer the fountain of questions and exclamations spilling from the edges of Mike’s lips. “He’s back. The Mindflyer is back.”

Mike slows down his panic, now that he can see the boy, that he’s tangible, and okay; but he frowns. “What? Did you see him again?”

“No, I just...feel him.”

Mike glances between his two friends and gulps, a chill running through his body. That’s when he glances back to Will, who sports a short-sleeved shirt and a rather short pair of shorts. *Well, he has nice legs at least .*

Beside the point, Wheeler .

“Here, take this.” Mike unzips his sweatshirt and shrugs it off. Sure, it’s soaked, but it must be *slightly* better than nothing.

Will meets his eye with a stony look. “I don’t need that.”

“Yeah, I don’t give a shit, Will, you don’t need a cold—“

“Neither do you!”

“Sucks to be me, I guess.” Mike shoves the jacket into Will’s chest as lightly as he can.

Will sighs and trains his eyes on the ground, moving to retrieve his bike, which is fallen askew. While he does, Mike approaches the

remains of Castle Byers. Raindrops damage some of Will's practiced drawings, ones that Mike knows he sometimes spent hours perfecting, making sure the colors matched with shadows and agonizing over whether everything was proportional and whatnot; but the drops simply bubble up and slide off the photos strewn on the ground. Group pictures from Halloween and science fairs. A photo torn between two best friends.

His long fingers pick up the pieces and shove them into his pocket, melancholic eyes following his best friend as he kicks off his bike into the rain.

Will heads into the basement bathroom after accepting a towel and clothes from Mike, who insisted he help. Lucas, who must have gotten from the bickering and ensuing silence between the two that they needed some time to talk, offered to go get snacks and tea from upstairs.

So, Mike waits while the boy props himself up on the washer in front of him, finally lifting his eyes to his face.

Mike drapes a blanket around Will's shoulders, rubbing the spots gently to generate some heat.

"Hi," Mike offers.

"Hey."

"Must be pretty cold, huh."

Well, it's obvious. Will now holds a strange pallor that he hadn't before, clearly affected by the storm and sudden revelations; his eyes are rung with purple, blinking listlessly at the ground, slow and languid and utterly sad.

"I feel great, actually. Never better."

The words stick in the air, awkward and heavy and dripping with sarcasm.

“Holy shit, dude, are you alright--”

Mike is shocked at the way Will yanks his feet up and under his thighs, hiding his lower legs from Mike’s gaze. But it’s still possible for him to see the boy’s knees: a dark, radishy red, blistered and bruised. And he itches to get a washcloth, to staunch the slowing, bubbly flow and ask how the hell it happened. But he doesn’t.

“Will, listen,” Mike says, and he swallows with immense difficulty. “I really didn’t mean to hurt you, you know. It’s just been really weird lately, and—“

“Mike, I don’t want to—“

“No, let me finish. I don’t.... I don’t want to stop caring about what you care about. I’m really not trying to hurt you.”

Will doesn’t comment. But he’s not looking down or away anymore; in fact, he’s looking right at Mike.

“So why do you?”

Mike imagined the conversation far differently in his head, so the turn of events has him reeling. “Um--”

“I mean, you’re not just hurting me.” Will lets his legs swing back down casually and braces himself against the edge of the washer. “You’re lying to El. And you know what, Mike? You’re lying to yourself.”

Mike scoffs in the red-heat of the moment, the painful twisty burning he feels in his chest, the anxiety in his belly. “Oh, fuck that, I’m not lying to anyone.” Will returns the scoff, widened eyes and sky-high eyebrows holding him sternly. “Fine! I lied to El. But only because Hopper basically threatened to kill me!”

“Mike! I don’t need to hear this! This may shock you, but you can actually *talk* to your girlfriend.”

What the fuck ? He talks to El. He tells her about comics, sings her songs from the radio sometimes, and uh...well, she kisses him.

“What’s that supposed to mean, Will?”

“It means--” Will clears the crack out of his voice, and on a normal day Mike would bump his shoulder and tease him about finally getting his ‘big boy’ voice, expecting a laughing ‘Screw off,’ in response, but he doesn’t. “It means that not everyone is entertained by the Mike and Eleven drama of the week, with the highlight reel of, ‘Inappropriate Places These Two Lovebirds Decided to Make Out.’ It means that maybe if you could communicate with anyone in your life, Mike--if you ever talked to me anymore--maybe things wouldn’t be so shit for you! And you don’t have any right to whine about that to everyone who will listen for five hours! Just deal with it!”

Mike blinks, takes a step back. Considers asking Will if he wants a cup of water after all of that, and immediately decides it’s a terrible, horrible idea, even though he really should take care of his throat after all that time out in the cold rain.

And, he had no clue how much he’d hurt this kid.

Or, scratch that, he was never forced to face it until now.

“And how am I lying to myself, Will?”

“Well--” Will still shouts, despite slowing down to think for a second. “I, I don’t know.” He lowers his voice, matching Mike’s fallen energy; Mike has folded in on himself and furrowed his brow so hard it’s hurting and he really, *really* doesn’t know how to save himself from this one. “I just feel like I lost my best friend somewhere along the way. You’re a completely different person with her.”

Mike wipes his wrist against the wells in his eyes. “Th-that’s not true.”

Silence.

“Mike, I’m sorry,” Will offers. When Mike doesn’t answer, he continues, “Listen, I’m not trying to guilt you, I just--”

“Will, don’t apologize.” Mike stares at his socks, trying to find something interesting to stare at in the threads, so that he doesn’t have to look up. He can’t. “You’re not--you’re not out of line. It’s on

me, okay? Just--don't. I just need a minute."

They breathe in silence for a few moments, and Mike bites down on his upper lip as his tear ducts swell and he *has* to accept it. He's wrong.

Mike should have talked El a long time ago. He should have said something, backed off, when the magic of a new relationship wore off and it felt like they were trapped in a shell of what they could be, rather than lasting affection; he should have stopped going over so much, but instead he went over every day to ignore those feelings, because he wanted it to work. He *liked* El, thought she was pretty and cool for a girl; and she liked him, so why couldn't that be enough? Why did his mind always have to drift?

Will. Will is here now, and Mike has been a jackass for months and ignored his best friend in the whole world. Tried to shove him away to make it easier for himself. Because his teasing, and the way his hand fit in Mike's like he was *made* to hold it, and the way he *knew* Mike and bounced off his personality with such ease was *painful* , because he couldn't have that forever even if he wanted.

And now that he's here, finally talking to Mike again, Mike is pouting and still acting like a jackass. He really doesn't deserve Will's forgiveness anymore.

He doesn't deserve Will.

It's Will who speaks up first. "You know, you always ask how I'm doing, and if I'm okay, and somehow I don't hate it like I do when other people are asking and—" he cuts his ramble short and takes a breath. "How are *you* doing?"

Mike forces his gaze up to Will's face. He sighs. "It doesn't m--"

"It does."

Mike squints his eyes at this boy who knows all of his predictable qualities far too well. "I don't know. I don't feel great about the whole break up, I guess."

Will sets his hands down and nods his head with a simple, "Yeah."

“And you...I don’t know, Will.”

“What?”

“It’s stupid.”

“So are you.”

Mike actually breaks into a subdued laugh. Will meets his eye with a calm, glinting smile. “Whatever.”

“Mike.” Will peers at him. “Are you okay?”

“No.”

“Well, what’s wrong?”

A beat. Slow and dragging and punctuated with laughter. “You terrify me, Byers.”

Will frowns. “*What ?*”

Mike is overcome with laughter, born from the anxiety that saunters through his stomach and poisons his brain. “You fucking terrify me, dude,” he finally repeats, drumming heartbeats picking up in his abdomen. “I mean, I don’t even know what to think. And I don’t want to freak you out.”

“Mike, it’s okay. Please, talk to me. You’re gonna go insane if you don’t get it out.” He tries and fails to meet Mike’s eye. “Remember, I’m your best friend, too. Please don’t shut me out.”

Tears flood Mike’s eyes. “I almost lost you twice. And--and I know that’s dumb, because you went through hell and back, but it was just so scary to watch, Will,” he hides his face with his arm, washing away shameful tears in his sleeve, “it was so scary and I’m scared that I’m losing you again and it’s gonna be my fault this time, and maybe that’s on purpose--”

His words spill into the air between them until there isn’t anymore.

Will slides off the washer and throws his arms around Mike’s neck,

stepping up on tip-toe and clinging to him like letting go is death. And it's the *best* fucking feeling in the world.

Second best.

Number one is when, somehow, in the mix of their tangled arms and tears and awkward faces, their lips meet with a desperate *push* . It's messy, and Will's nose digs into Mike's cheek pointily, but it doesn't matter because it's *Will* ; it's Will Byers, his best friend, who's been with him since day one, who knows him probably better than he knows himself, because that's how they work: they know just enough about themselves and each other to never need words again, if need be, and they know what drives each other crazy, and they know how to take care of each other.

It's Will Byers, who said yes. Over and over again.

It's Will who pulls away, takes a second to catch his breath, and says, "You're not gonna lose me, Mike."

Mike blinks. He's still holding Will's face, fingers splayed across his cheek from when he reached up, shaking, during the kiss. And he doesn't know where to go from there, other than to take some deep breaths and keep holding on, just in case.

"Okay."

It feels like forever. The girls make their way over to Mike's house, and push off awkward glances and glares between exes, and they all realize that a part of the Mindflayer must be trapped in Hawkins with them. As Will details it--the feeling, the distinct moments he's been haunted--Mike gnaws on his lip, recalling each moment that he was there, and the one he wasn't. His stomach drops when he thinks about how alone Will must have felt in the field that day.

And god, El.

She's different.

Her style is different; she's more vibrant and feminine, and more

vocal. She doesn't seem to believe Will's recollection at first, but it sings loud and clear to Mike: they have to assume the worst. They have to take it on like a hypothesis in a true experiment, rather than rely on observation. Because the longer they observe, the more people can and will disappear.

And Mike will be damned if it takes Will again.

"Hey, you gonna be okay?"

"Future tense, Michael? You're advancing."

Unlike before--before, well, what *happened* --when Mike would just chuckle or throw back another stupid comment, he *blushes* . It's the dumbest comeback ever, not even that funny, but he and Will are bustling around, going over their plan for the sauna, bumping arms now and then, and he's flustered.

"Shut up." Mike takes a box from Will's arms and raises his eyebrows playfully. "I'm just making sure."

Will rolls his eyes. "Well, aren't you a modern day hero?"

If he could, he'd probably kiss him again; if only to wipe the smug look off Will's face, see him blush again, and win the back-and-forth. The box between them prevents that from happening.

But if he's not mistaken, he sees an exasperated little smile on Will's face. Maybe they're okay.

He catches sight of El in one of the storage rooms, glowing bright among the dark shelves. From what he can see, she has found a dummy that they can use to reel Billy in. In an attempt to make amends, he approaches her, instead of taking off in the other direction like he really wants to.

"Woah, that thing is super creepy! Let me see it." He snatches the dummy (*ugly son of a bitch*) and chuckles, saying, "I think this'll

work, right buddy?" he puts on a voice, "'Right Mike.'"

While he is fully entertained, El takes it back and glares up at him.

Cool segue, Mike .

He clears his throat. Alright, here goes. "Hey, El, I just wanted to say. You know when I said Nana was sick? She wasn't. I lied."

"I know."

"Right, right, right. No, uh, I just think it's important for you to know the context." His lip is going to bleed if he bites down any harder, gazing nervously at her steely brown eyes. "Hopper, he went crazy on me, telling me I was spending way too much time with you. He made me lie." He sucks in a breath. "I mean, you're the most important thing to me in the world--"

"What if he's right?"

"What?"

"Hop."

Mike scoffs into a chuckle. "No, no, no, no, he's just some angry old man who hates joy."

El raises her eyebrows, flicking them with some deep-seated irritation while she speaks. "But if I only see you, and I'm a different species than you, then I should be with my species more."

Mike frowns. "What are you talking about?"

She turns on her heel. And then it comes crashing down on him.

"Did you spy on me? That's totally against the rules!"

"I make my own rules." El storms from the room, stony-faced, and, well, *shit* . He doesn't know how the hell to fix things with her, and now he doesn't know if he even *wants* to.

That's not true. He still cares about her. And she'll probably save

their lives.

Max's voice breaks through the following silence, bringing him back to real life.

It's like enticing a sick little lab rat.

Mike's voice croons a sing-songy, "Billy!" until the guy reaches the sauna, whipping around to see El after he exclaims, "Behind you!"

"Hi."

Billy's body is thrown back against the wall harshly, and the rest of the Party zooms in, flicking on the lights and, through a combined effort, clicking the door shut and locking him in. Step one, complete.

It's *horrifying* to see Billy's sweat-slick face in the window, body ramming against the door, eyes crazy as he whispers, "Max."

The monster of a human eyes up each and every one of them, yelling as though this is a *prank*, some funny little joke. He shakes, rattles, spits, growls at them.

"Open. The door. Open the *goddamn* door!"

Will rushes forward and Mike widens his eyes, but he just checks the temperature. "We're at 220."

Now, Billy turns really ugly, sobbing and crying and appealing to Max's sympathy, targeting her out of the group because despite how *horrible* he is to her, of course she has some semblance of care. Or, at the very least, it's hard to listen to another person cry like that. Mike winces.

"I've done things, Max, bad things. I didn't mean to..."

"Who made you do it?"

"I don't know, it's like a shadow," his voice comes out in tremors, and Mike and Will exchange a look. Max steps closer. "Please, Max."

He keeps crying out, whimpering and groaning in a guttural way, a way that makes Mike want to flinch away, like at an especially gory scene in a movie. But this, this is far more threatening, far more terrifying.

Will stirs next to him. "I feel him." He looks up at Mike, breath heaving in his chest. "He's activated."

Mike's stomach drops. *Rollercoaster* . He holds a steady, reassuring gaze on Will. "Max, get away from the door."

"What?"

He breaks away. "GET AWAY FROM THE DOOR!"

She leaps away just quickly enough to avoid getting stabbed, as Billy shatters the glass, screaming and gesturing wildly with his chunk of cement. "Let me out, you bitch! I'll fucking gut you!"

Acting quickly, Lucas knocks Billy in the face with his slingshot. "Max, come on!" He grabs Max's arms and pulls her back with the group, to the safest possible point in the scene of hell before them.

Mike's hand grabs listlessly at the air, catching on Will's sleeve briefly, but then the lights are flickering and they're all glancing around, but Mike is caught between the door and the lights and whatever else could possibly fuck them over.

Lucas bought them some time, but it's fleeting. Billy slams against the door, and El puts her arms up protectively; next to Mike, Lucas mutters, panicked, that there's no way Billy can get out, *no way* .

Except he does.

And the way he looks at them is deadly. *He* looks deadly. Veins puffing out black, blood trickling from his orifices, eyes burning with something even colder than hatred.

Mike holds on to the back of Will's shirt, prepared to pull him back if Billy moves; but for a moment, he just meets them with a menacing stare. The second that he shifts merely an *inch* , El is prepared, and she slams the bitch against the wall, pinned with a weight.

God, it's ugly. The weights break through the brick wall and Billy's red-and-black, sweaty face bulges, just before he surges forward and grabs El by the throat.

It's stunning, in a terribly gruesome way. As she goes red in the face, choking from the force, Mike steps forward with a tremble and grabs the metal bar they used in the door; and with one fell sweep he knocks Billy to the ground.

"Go to hell, you piece of shit!" He tries to hit him again, but Billy catches hold of the bar, staring up at him. And suddenly, he's Billy's main attraction.

Mike backs against the wall, but just as he had her back, El has his. She lifts Billy up epically, screeching and knocking him through the wall with the rest of her energy, and Mike catches her as she slumps to the ground. Her nose drips a thick red and she shakes as he helps her stand, supporting her under her arms.

Billy gets away. He runs off into the night, and they have no idea where he'll go. But they need to go home.

Mike bites his tongue to avoid another, 'You okay?' which is now apparently some running joke between him and Will.

"Will, uh, did you get hurt, or anything?"

The boy shakes his head. "Nah, I'm okay." He pedals up next to Mike. "You?"

"No, I'm good."

"Pretty scary stuff. He could've killed you."

Mike glances over, deadpan, though the shock of it all still resides as a chill in his chest. "Funny, Will."

"Hey . I'm fine, okay?"

"Alright, hotshot, whatever. I'm fine too. We just gotta check up on

El.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

Notes for the Chapter:

:-) i hope you guys like this chapter! also, please check out this art that @baileys-beesechurger on tumblr made for this fic!! <https://baileys-beesechurger.tumblr.com/post/187827520200/fanart-for-the-wonderful-lesbian-hopper-and-their> it's so cool!! i'm absolutely baffled that someone liked this enough to make art for it :) but i appreciate it a lot. and i appreciate the comments you guys have been leaving <3 i hope you'll continue to leave comments/kudos if you enjoy! and please always feel free to pop by on tumblr and send me prompts or just chat :D everyone is so cool and nice so i'd really love that.

10. max

Summary for the Chapter:

“Max, I can’t do it,” she whispers. It’s more of a whimper; a murmur of fatigue and guilt and just plain fear all tangling up like vines in her throat. “What if I can’t do it? What if I can’t finish it?”

Notes for the Chapter:

tumblr: @lesbian-hopper

Purple and blue dustings splay across El’s neck, a damning recall to the horror of earlier that day, when Max’s brother had taken her into his hands and brutalized her. He damn near killed her. Max grimaces as she turns back to El, a warm washcloth in hand, eyes trickling down to the bruise that he’d left on her, that he’d had the *nerve* to leave on her.

It wasn’t him, but as Max lifts her hand to the girl’s nose with a gentle press, eyes trained on her neck, she ponders over how far off it really was. He would have killed Lucas last year, if Steve hadn’t stepped in and taken the beating for him. Plenty of times, he’d come home from a party, storming into Max’s room just to lift her jaw and leave alcohol-soaked spittle on her face as he reminded her what a useless piece of shit she was; worth less than the bottle he handled with care in his other hand, swaying threateningly close to her face. So really, she wonders to herself, *is it that far off?*

Will was different with the Mindflyer; he was the sun, and a dreadful black hole consumed him at the edges. With all of the fight left in his body, he strained and pulled against the demon taking over to save them. Through all of it, to the very end, he was good.

But Billy. Billy nearly killed El, held her like a plaything in front of all of their faces, right after Max promised that she would always be safe from her family. He threatened her friends constantly. He *hurt* people.

El catches her eye briefly, corners of her lips pulled downward with what seems to be the force of gravity, exhaustion plaguing all of her features. A smattering of blood smears along her top lip and around the edges of her nose. She turns her gaze back to the mirror, her own cracked fingernails dragging down the length of her neck.

“Does it still hurt?”

El turns back to Max, swallowing painfully. “Only when I talk.”

With a sense of desperation to see El happy again, hidden only by the smile on Max’s face, she says, “Well, it’s a good thing you’re not Mike, then. ‘Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,’ you’d be in constant pain.” Comically, dramatic shouting comes from the other room, clearly in Mike’s lilting voice. And, in the harrowing darkness of it all, El’s sweet spring-day laughter fills the room--raspy and damaged, but there.

With a giggle of her own, Max returns the washcloth to El’s nose; and with a careful sweeping motion, turns El’s chin upward with a finger to see the full damage. It’s a small act, but the soft skin of El’s face and the way she smiles silently when Max lifts her eyes to make sure it’s all *okay* , and the way she realizes they’re speaking in a silent language and Max is touching El’s jaw—it’s so much to take in, and it’s overwhelming her senses, like a flame in open air; El is so very close and hurting and it’s doing something wicked to Max’s stomach.

Fortunately, the not-so-distant sound of bickering distracts her. Lucas and Mike go back and forth in a way that makes El and Max share an eye roll and move on, but Max’s attention is quickly grabbed again.

Mike seriously says, “They’re conspiring against me!”

“That’s your main concern right now?” Will throws back immediately, and a strong affection swells in Max’s chest at the sound of his voice, like a protective, thundering storm.

“It’s not my main concern, it’s just a sub-concern.”

“I thought it was already over!”

There’s a moment of silence, and Max finds herself leaning in close to

the door to hear the rest.

“It’s--well--it’s a break, Will, but I just meant--”

Max can almost hear the way Will’s jaw sets. “She said she dumped your ass. That doesn’t sound like a break!”

She’s not entirely sure of the exact forest fire of emotions smoking between the two boys, but she pauses to defend Will in the same way that he’d spoken up for the girls. “It wasn’t! You guys do realize we can still hear everything you’re saying, right?”

El practically cackles behind her, grabbing onto Max’s arm and pulling herself forward from the wall, caught in a fit of amusement. And Max holds her back, swiping a thumb across her cheek with a quiet, “Finished,” once her face is clear.

Nancy. Nancy Wheeler is the missing puzzle piece they need to confirm what they’d been theorizing; to begin to piece together anything that will help them find Billy. She darts into the basement, glancing around with a certain ferocity, and seems to make a mental checklist--only satisfied when she notes all of the kids are there, standing around and staring at her in confusion. Under her gaze, Max feels safe, like a quilt is wrapped around her shoulders, shielding her from the world; and the feeling only grows to a gentle stir in her stomach when Nancy ushers them all outside to the car, brushing a hand against Max’s shoulder with a protective grip. She seems to be reassuring herself that they’re all truly okay, that they’re not flubbing the truth to make her less concerned; and she takes special notice of Will, Max realizes, when she offers a small smile and glances at Jonathan with something like true relief.

But it’s only the beginning.

A full-blown investigation is launched at Heather’s house, solidifying their ideas, and in minutes Will is able to instruct them: they need to go back to Mrs. Driscoll.

They crowd into the hospital waiting room as ‘visitors’. For a few

moments, after the hustle and bustle of the car, packed in and clinging to each other because Nancy is a *fantastic* driver, they all sit or lean against the wall and let out a breath. For a few moments, nothing is hurting them.

Max tucks her feet under her legs, glancing along the beige-lined walls, keeping an eye on her friends; Lucas at the vending machine, Mike and Will packed in close together in two chairs opposite her, El patiently flipping through a magazine next to Lucas, chattering briefly and chuckling after he says something. Nancy and Jonathan are the first to go investigate, of course, because they're old or something.

Max rests her head back against the chair; no one slept very well the previous night, and the bags claw at her under-eyes, dragging her into shadows. Everything is heavy and it feels so nice to close her eyes after the tears and the energy that has been spent is long gone. Sleep, sleep is an old friend, one that she'd really like to revisit...

But mere moments later, when Max is dozing but not quite asleep, she hears shuffling and peers an eye open to see Will, walking away from Mike with an empty look. She catches his attention and nods toward the end of the hallway, where there is a small station for coffee and tea left unoccupied.

They remain silent until they're sure none of the others followed, and grab styrofoam cups to fill with shitty hospital hot chocolate.

"Hey," Will starts quietly, a terribly quiet mumble in the sea of beeping monitors and carts being wheeled by nurses. "You okay?"

She nods and presses her back into the wall. "Yeah. Well, no. Not really. But I don't want to talk about it right now, if that's okay. I don't really wanna think about it yet."

"I get it."

It's nice to not be alone. Will has the steady, reassuring presence of a tide washing over the shore; he's solid as a rock and gentle enough to not rock the boat.

“How is everything with Mike?”

His disposition breaks for mere seconds; brows furrowing, leaning himself against the wall, a wick of a candle blowing out in his eyes. “Dunno, Max.”

“Tell me about it, stud.”

Will rolls his eyes at the stupid reference. “We had this really great night and some stupid part of me thought that I could tell him, you know, someday soon, but then--” he breaks off, voice cracking, tears breaking through his glassy expression, “we had a fight in the morning, and then we fought more trying to talk about it, and now--I think we’re fine? At least now it feels more...” he clicks his tongue, “honest.”

Max shifts her attention from Will over to Mike, briefly, and notices how the latter is staring over at Will with profuse concern, and she mumbles under her breath, “Just kiss already,” before she prepares herself for a heartfelt, gentler speech. She softens her expression and takes a sip of her drink, moving to begin.

But he interrupts. “Well, we did.”

She hacks up a cough on the powder of the severely under-mixed drink, eyes watering as she stares up at Will. “Oh, you were just gonna sit on that, Byers? *What* ? Who kissed who?” Though excitable, Max is sure to speak in hushed tones.

“You see, Max, it’s sort of a joint effort.”

“You’re such an ass.”

Clearly amused, with a soft twinkle in his eyes, Will says, “Sure, yeah. Well, I don’t know. He kissed me back.”

Max feels like her eyes are going to fall out of her face if they bulge any further as she takes in the new information. The two boys, who always had a special bond, always fought for each other, and held on tighter the moment one started slipping--and whose flirting was so goddamn *obvious* to watch all the time--had finally fucking kissed.

She smiles cheekily, nudging him with her arm. "How was it?"

The furious flush that takes across his cheeks as he trains his eyes on the rim of the cup says it all. "It doesn't feel real. I keep thinking I imagined it, honestly."

"Did he say how he felt?"

"Nah, we didn't really talk about it."

And just like that, these two are back to being the most giant dumbasses she knows.

Will continues, "And now he's," he flicks his gaze in the direction of Mike and El, talking with shadows of smiles brushing across their lips, "with *her* again, and I just think that was the most I'm ever gonna get."

A balloon pops in Max's chest and wheezes as it deflates, as she stares over at El and Mike. It's like watching a mouse inching toward a trap, except it's nothing as dramatic as death--

"Will--"

"I know I should be happy. But now that I've...now that we've shared that, and he's still--I just know now that no matter how close I get, I'll never get to have him."

Mike and El chuckle in the distance, sharing candy, and it seems that all of the stupid giggles and touches and almost kisses and El holding her until she fell asleep--everything that made her insides fall apart on laughing gas--is all lost so quickly. So *easily* .

With a sinking feeling in her stomach, she takes Will's hand, and with a sad smile just murmurs, "It'll be okay."

As soon as Max sidles up next to Lucas, an uneasy mix of comfort and weight boils in her chest, but she can't help but be amused at his easygoing expression on his face as he leans against the nearly-empty vending machine, pockets stuffed and mouth full of candy.

“Enjoying yourself, stalker?”

A smile snatches the corner of his mouth as she approaches. “Time of my life, Max. How’re you?”

There’s genuine concern in his eyes as he looks her over, and she knows that it’s saved solely for her, regardless of the situation. And she understands.

She shrugs. “He’s an asshole. Hard to feel like...like he *doesn’t* deserve it.” Crossing her arms, Max leans back against the wall, pressing her lips together nervously. “But maybe it makes me just as bad--to not feel, you know, sorry. I--I don’t know what’s worse.”

“I think you gotta just let yourself feel it either way.” He moves to stand next to her, pressing their shoulders together. “Don’t make it harder.”

Guilt tugs at her heartstrings yet again; Lucas deserves better than what she can offer with her family. She knows it must be hard to deal with, and Max hates Billy more every day. Every time Lucas thought of her, or brought her a gift to make up for some stupid fight, or tugged her into his side affectionately, she was happy; happy until she was alone, and an ugly part of her mind brought her thoughts of how horrible her blood kin was. They were violent, and they never understood, nor would they try to understand. And Max grappled with that guilt, only worsened in the last day--because she *hates* Billy, she hates him for everything he’s done to her, and the hatred with which he’s treated everyone she really loves. Her *real* family. And she hates the sympathetic glances, and the words of kindness, because she doesn’t want her love to be associated with him.

But maybe that makes her just as ugly.

“Max.”

Lucas’s calm voice pulls her from her head, gentle and reassuring.

“Yeah?”

“Stop.”

She frowns. "What?"

"I know you're being unfair to yourself, somehow, right now, even if you won't tell me." He raises an eyebrow. "I'm not mad at you for how *he* is. You know that, right?"

She gnaws on her lip. "I know. But--he's a piece of shit, and he always has been, and I know that my parents are gonna be pissed when they find out. And if I'm not, like, sobbing over him, they're gonna say I'm some heartless asshole. And it was hard to hear him cry for my help, because sometimes I--I wish I could. But I can't fix him."

"Hey, that's not your job." When she doesn't respond, he says, "Come here."

In his arms, a few tears spill down her cheeks, and she squeezes him tighter. "Lucas, I need to talk to you about something."

"Go ahead." He rubs her back.

"I've been going through a lot lately and there's--there's just a lot going on, and I really don't think that um--" she clears her throat. "Hang on. Okay. Let me restart. Lucas, you mean the world to me, and you are my best friend, you know that, right?"

She can feel him nod. "Yeah, Max, it's okay." Concern is bleeding into his voice. "But I don't understand."

She breathes in deeply, taking in his familiar, gentle scent; cologne and fresh soap, and the sweetness of candy flooding from his pockets and his face. "I don't think that I can handle a relationship right now." Her heart picks up rapidly. "I don't want to hurt you, but I--I just think I need space."

"Woah, woah, woah, hang on," he says, pulling back and holding her by the shoulders, concentration playing across his face. "You're not just saying this to, like, protect me or something, right? You know I can--I can handle it. I don't want you to feel like you have to go through this alone, Max, I want to be here for you."

"It's not just that, Lucas." She gazes at him painfully. "In fact I--I do

still want you here, and I want you to lean on me too. There's just a lot of stuff I need to figure out and...I can't drag you along for that." The corner of her mouth turns up. "It's not you, it's me, okay?"

He looks at her for a long time, and she knows it hurts. It hurts her too, and she never wanted to hurt him, but she knows it would be worse if she waited. "Okay," he says finally.

"Lucas?"

"Yeah?"

Max takes his hand from her shoulder, pulls it between them, and gives a gentle squeeze. "I do love you."

He chuckles. "I love you too."

"Can we still be friends?"

Lucas scoffs. "You kidding me, Mad Max? We're *best friends*. You couldn't drop me if you tried. Well, unless you really wanted, but I mean--"

She giggles through tears and pulls him back into a hug, arms resting on his shoulders. "Are you sure you're okay with just friends?"

Lucas smiles, albeit painfully, and retreats from the embrace to wipe the tears from her cheeks. "I'm okay, Max. As long as you're still here."

A bit dramatically, she says, "I'll always be here Lucas."

He rolls his eyes fondly.

"Alright, enough about me. How are you doing, actually?" Max asks, pulling out coins of her own to get herself a snack.

"I don't know. Uh, I miss Dustin," he says quietly. "He's not answering any calls, and we haven't hung out in forever. And Mike--I love the guy, but he's getting on my nerves. He and Will won't stop fighting, and now he's fighting with El, too, and he's always ranting to me about it and I don't *mind*, but right now I can't do it. I'm tired

of just hearing about it.”

Max offers a smile. “Mike never fails to meet my standards of absolute buffoonery.”

“Tell me about it! He didn’t know how to find an ‘I’m sorry’ present. He thought I was talking about greeting cards or some shit, or some fancy necklace with ‘I’m sorry’ engraved--what kind of present is *that* ? He cannot read between the lines at all.”

“Oh my god,” she laughs heartily. “Good thing you were there to teach him, huh, stud muffin.”

“Maxine, if you ever call me that again--”

“You just called me Maxine!”

“As payback!”

And with him, as always, it’s easy to loosen up, to have fun and just talk. Lucas may be hurting--she is too--but they keep a steady hand on each other’s shoulders, lifting each other through the pain, minute by minute. They have each other’s backs, then and always.

And thank god, because they’re gonna need it.

El saves Nancy’s life. If Will had felt the Mindflyer’s presence even a moment later, if they had scrambled up to the floor absolutely wrecked by the fight between Nancy and Jonathan and the monster, she would likely be dead.

Luckily, however, El slams the door open and the vicious, snarling creature goes flying by their faces; up, down, around, and through the window. Jonathan runs to meet Nancy, to check on her and bring her to her feet, but with a quick, “We’ll meet you down there, run!” the Party darts back down the stairs and to the parking lot.

The slimy, blood-soaked guts of the Mindflyer slides down the sewers with disgusting squelching noises, and all of the friends glance around with terror painted on their faces.

Max steps forward and checks on El, taking her cheeks in her hands, and saying an urgent, “El!” to get her attention; the girl is preoccupied, trying desperately to seek a way to finish off the Flayer once and for all, but it doesn’t seem that tonight will be the night. It’s gone.

Finally, El looks at Max, brown eyes intense with fear and dark blood dripping down her nose; and she reaches an arm out and tugs Max into an embrace, tucking her head into the crook of her neck. Quietly, she cries, sobs of exhaustion, soft sniffles against Max’s shoulder. She pulls her in ever closer and Max feels tears coming too, but she focuses on tightening her grip on El, to give her some sense of security.

“Max, I can’t do it,” she whispers. It’s more of a whimper; a murmur of fatigue and guilt and just plain *fear* all tangling up like vines in her throat. “What if I can’t do it? What if I can’t finish it?”

“You can, El. We have your back now. And if anyone knows how to do this, it’s you.”

El pulls back, but holds on to Max’s shoulder, frown still on her face. “I hope.”

“I know,” Max says, taking El’s hand. “We’ve got you.”

The girl has just enough time to meet her with a tear-soaked, hesitant smile.

“Alright! Everyone, in the car now,” Nancy says the moment she catches up with them. Honestly, she’s a walking and talking tornado; a mess of hair and ruined makeup, bruises and scratches running along her face and arms. Jonathan is holding her steady, grasping her shoulders. It’s kind of a badass look, but nonetheless, Max prefers to see her stable. “We gotta get home. You guys need to rest.”

Mike pipes up, “You too, Nance.” It’s more protective than argumentative.

She meets his eye with a fleeting smile. “Let’s go.”

They all stay together for the night. It's safer that way. Max supports El into the house, linking their fingers and half-carrying her to a comfortable bed.

Most lights are turned off, only a gentle lamplight shining in the living area. Nancy and Jonathan settle out there together, huddling and talking quietly into the night; and as the boys rest on the couch and floor, Max leads El into her room. The girl is a dead weight in her arms, burning her muscles from the strain, but it's all worth it once Max finally gets her comfortable and settled on the mattress. She curls into a ball and Max covers her with a blanket, moving to get up from the side of the bed, but El grabs her forearm.

"Max, please stay."

"Of course, El. I'm here."

El clings to her arm, even as she slides under the covers with her, and uses it as leverage to face her and tug her closer. Honestly, it melts Max's heart to see how cozy El can be with her; to feel her breaths puffing from her nose against her shoulder, the curve of her cheek pressed against Max's knuckles, fingers clasped around her wrist.

It's easy, at least for right now, for Max to drop all of her questions about Mike, or anything else going on. Right now, El needs her, and like hell if she's gonna betray that with trivial nonsense. Right now, they just need each other.

And it makes it *much* easier to fall asleep intertwined like that.

Notes for the Chapter:

heyyy wow so i LOVE them but also i needed to get some big conversations in this chapter, so i hope that was nice? i had a lot of fun writing this one
also i recently surpassed 100 followers on tumblr and im on my way to 200! ahh that's so awesome, thank you guys so much <3 if any of you guys follow me on tumblr, feel free to let me know if there's any way i can celebrate/express my gratitude!!
anyway, thank you all so much for reading and

commenting <33 you make my day. have a
wonderful day/night

11. will

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike's eyebrows twitch, a small smile bringing back another conversation, one mirroring their intents and understanding now; the lingering way he meets Will's eye begs the question, the shy inquiry: does the promise still stand?

Notes for the Chapter:

tumblr: @lesbian-hopper

Will closes his eyes.

It's been a while since they felt so heavy so late at night. He's grown accustomed to disrupted nights made up by the occasional nap. But right now, he finds himself falling deeper and deeper into a thick doze, swallowed in the knitted blankets and desperate *need* for sleep. Except, tonight, he doesn't have to fight with himself to settle into a restful state. It's easy. And it has absolutely nothing to do with the comfort he feels with the boy at his side.

"Hey, guys, we're going to try to rest for a bit in Hopper's room for the night," Jonathan starts, and Will manages to peel an eye open to nod in acknowledgment. Mike, arms out and tucking his body into the covers, says a simple, "Okay, goodnight."

Nancy shows up behind Jonathan, and she rubs the spot between his shoulder blades lightly as she says, "Let us know if you need anything, okay?"

"Yeah. 'Night, guys." Will tugs the blanket up and over his shoulder.

"'Night," they chime back.

Then it's quiet again.

They lay like that for a while, side to side. Despite the tons weighing down his eyelids, Will's mind is racing a mile a minute; and he knows

Mike is awake, and he's not getting to sleep any time soon. He knows this; if there's anyone he knows well enough to determine something as tedious as sleeping patterns, it's Mike. He just *knows* what this boy is like when he's really tired, his back or arms pressed up against Will in sleep or in a half-awake, whiny state; he knows how heavily Mike will slump against him in a truly good sleep, open-mouthed and twitchy--utterly ridiculous and stupidly adorable.

But right now, it's like he's practicing for a deathbed. He's stiff as can be.

Will doesn't know where they stand, in his mind or Mike's; and even just lying there, pressed up against each other's sides, feels tenser than it used to. Then again, Will is still on edge from the events of the hospital, and the bone-weary way El had fallen into the car, and how Max had to carry her in; and it's still not over. So, Mike is probably just rattled as well. Right?

"Hey," Will says quietly, not wanting to disturb a snoozing Lucas on the couch. The boy had curled into the couch cushions and passed out almost as soon as they got through the door.

Right now, Will is groggy but buzzed with nerves, longing to see through Mike's fretfulness. And, he wants to figure out the answers to some basic questions. Maybe Mike is trying to get back with El, maybe he's not. Maybe he liked the kiss. Maybe he didn't.

The more he thinks about it, the more Will feels rigid in his own skin, like an echo of his person boiling at the constant contact at his side. But Mike doesn't pull away, and at least for right now, he'll take what he can get.

Mike answers with a soft, "Hey."

"What's on your mind?"

Mike shrugs.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine, Will, you don't need to worry about me."

Will gives a half shrug. "But I do."

Mike turns to him, face resting on his palm, eyes tired and desperate and so beautiful it's painful. He says nothing aloud, but it's written all across his features.

Will smiles, a bit beside himself. "We talked about this, Mike, you can talk to me."

But it was during *that* conversation, the one that neither of them had the guts to acknowledge until this very moment.

"I just--" Mike sighs, stares up at the ceiling, licks his lips in thought. "I'm worried about... about El. And you. Everyone."

"Well, we're worried about you too, Mike." Will rests his head on his forearm, and properly faces him. "You do know that, right?"

"Yeah, I know." Mike presses his lips together. "Hey, when did you become friends with Max?"

"Uh," Will makes a face, reeling from the quick subject change. "I don't know, recently. Why?"

"I've just never seen you guys really talk before the hospital, I guess."

If Will isn't mistaken--and he's usually not when it comes to Mike--he notes jealousy in his tone.

He responds, "Is there something that you're trying to say?"

"No, that was dumb." Mike sighs. "I don't really know. I don't know what I'm thinking, Will. I'm sorry."

Will shakes his head. "You don't have to be sorry, I just don't understand why you asked."

"I was just--I was worried that because, you know, El and Max were mad at me and-- I don't know."

"You're worried she's going to corrupt me?" A smirk plays on the corner of Will's mouth. He speaks in a whisper to follow up, "I think

we had our own thing to settle anyway.”

Mike plays with his fingers. “Yeah, um, speaking of. I’m really sorry for being a dick. I know I can’t make it up to you, ‘cause I’ve been treating you like shit for a while and,” a painful look crosses his face, “I’m really sorry I kept leaving you out. And I’m still sorry that I made fun of the campaign--it was seriously cool.”

“Oh, I’m aware, I used my free time well,” Will jokes. Noting the still-miserable look on Mike’s face, he continues, “Listen, Mike. You’ve been my best friend for years. I just... *missed* you. I guess I missed being,” he clears his throat, floundering for a word that he knows, but he shouldn’t, “I guess it just hurt that after everything, you pulled away from me. I thought you’d miss me too.”

Will cringes, wishing that he’d just brushed it off past the joke. But it’s hard to lie in the face of the boy that he loves.

“I did miss you. A lot,” Mike replies easily.

“You didn’t show it very well.”

“I know.” Mike gnaws on his lip. “Will, I wish I could make it up to you, and I know I can’t. I’ve just been...going through a lot--god, that sounds stupid! Ugh, I just mean that there’s a lot that I’m trying to figure out, and you made it more complicated.”

Well, that’s a gut punch if Will has ever heard one. “Mike, what the hell are you talking about?” An ice cold anxiety creeps into his heart, his extremities shaking from the bundles of nerves constricting at every crevice in his body.

The boy’s eyes widen and he grabs Will’s shoulder, squeezing gently. He breathes slowly, exaggerating the movements until Will mirrors him. “No, please, just--just listen. I’ve been ignoring a lot for a long time and it’s been easier with distance from you. But that’s just the thing, Will,” he says, a mildly manic laugh playing the air between them; he takes a firm grasp on Will’s cheek while talking. “I pulled away when I realized how confusing you made everything. But I forgot to remember how much *better* everything is with you.”

Will sucks in a breath and mumbles a wary, “What does that mean, Mike?”

He lowers his eyebrows and sighs. “I don’t know.” Mike seems to grapple with what he’s trying to say, flashing through quite a few emotions in just a few seconds. “I know I sound crazy, but I really do wanna make things better.”

Slowly but surely, Will’s previously catastrophic breathing slows, and he blinks away the tears welling in his eyes. “Okay.” He nods as he speaks. “Okay. You can make it up to me, I suppose,” he teases, though his voice is bogged down by swelling in his throat, “and you don’t sound crazy. I get it. I think.”

Mike’s eyebrows twitch, a small smile bringing back another conversation, one mirroring their intents and understanding now; the lingering way he meets Will’s eye begs the question, the shy inquiry: does the promise still stand?

And in response, Will nods, chuckling through the panicky tears that had escaped, a stupid toothy grin taking over his features. “Crazy together.”

Mike meets his smile with a brilliant one of his own, an intense juxtaposition to his expression just moments ago. He removes his hand from Will’s cheek slowly, painfully awkwardly, shoving it under the covers and sort of laying on it.

In the silence that follows, Will braces himself for a big question.

“So uh, how are things with El?”

Will hates himself a little bit for ruining a good moment, hates himself for asking, and hates himself for his anticipation of either answer.

“Yeah, uh. We talked. Everything’s fine,” Mike says shortly. Will tilts his head at the cool way he answers, but brushes it off as Mike continues. “I’m just really worried about her. It’s like, before, I knew she could defeat anything that came our way. But now I don’t know.”

Will, fatigue-ridden and not following, asks, “What do you mean?”

“She’s not used to doing *this much* , Will.”

“That we know of.”

Mike sighs. “Well we don’t want to emulate her past, do we?” Will shakes his head, murmuring something and nothing in agreement, and so Mike continues, “It’s just--back to back to back, she keeps going, and we have to ask her to do more? She’s gonna get herself killed.”

“Mike,” Will frowns, “don’t you trust her to know what her limits are? I mean, she’s kinda the most badass person I’ve ever crossed paths with, I think she can handle it. She’s saved my life twice now.”

“Well, yeah, but she probably just feels like she has to protect us now, whether she can handle it or not.”

“Kinda like someone else I know.”

Mike turns to Will, face a murky sea of troubles, biting his lip to the point of nearly bleeding. “Like I said, I’m fine, Will--unscathed even.”

Will nods and stays quiet. He offers a small smile and reaches out his hand to brush away the budding tears from Mike’s cheeks with his thumb. “Yeah, it’s pretty surprising, considering your weapon of choice is a mic.”

“Shut up!” Mike mumbles, his jaw dropping and eyes widening defensively as he kicks at Will’s leg under the covers.

Will giggles. “I’m right! I can’t speak for everything, but you’ve never had a stellar history in self-defense.”

“Hm, I seem to remember having your back when it came to Troy a multitude of times, good friend.”

“And yet I seem to remember that we still walked away in an awful state,” Will responds, eyebrow twitching upward tauntingly. *But we were in it together* , is what he wants to add.

“We survived.”

It's almost hard to look Mike in the eye. He's intimately close, *ridiculously* within kissing distance, and his heart might give out if he lets himself gaze any longer at the slopes and curves of his face, as they chuckle along with what Will said. There's a smile that snatches at his mouth, saved just for Will.

Fuck it .

Will scoots into the last bit of Mike's space, still stroking his cheekbone with his thumb.

"Mike, I need you to do me a favor. Two, actually."

"Okay?"

"Okay," Will affirms. "Just try to trust El. And remember that we're gonna be here with her every step of the way. She'll be okay."

Mike presses his lips together. "Right."

"And uh," he continues, letting his hand drag into Mike's hair, curving gently right by his ear, "remember to take care of yourself, okay? I need you to be alright, too."

The boy is silent. Then he's nodding, nose brushing against Will's. "You too." There's an intensity in the gaze of his dark brown eyes, piercing through Will's heart and nesting there, burning and bleeding. Mike's hand finds its way to Will's waist under the covers, tugging him in closer and curling into the fabric.

"Cause, uh," Will continues, the words trapped thickly in his throat, "you know I l--"

Mike raises an eyebrow.

"I--we--care about you," Will fumbles. "And you deserve the same amount of love that you give."

"Didn't know you were into writing greeting cards, Byers," Mike murmurs, all cheeky smiles and teasy eyebrows.

And Will finds that he is a *whole* lot less witty when he's under Mike's

gaze, only a few inches away; when the boy is touching his waist and practically pulling him in.

But he does his best. He raises an eyebrow, deflecting from his absolutely on-fire cheeks. "Goodnight, Wheeler." He flips over to his other side, burying his terribly hot cheeks in his hands, scrunching his eyes shut to push away his thoughts, to push away what he knows--he was just about to kiss Mike Wheeler for a second time. And with more purpose, in a moment that still has his heart pounding in his ears.

If they keep getting themselves into situations like that, Will might have a heart attack.

"Goodnight, Will."

He's willing to accept that risk.

It's early when Will first hears someone stirring in the kitchen. Dawn skylight barely creeps through the blinds, but the gentle rumbling and bubbling of a coffee pot indicates someone evidently ready to take on the day.

Will forces an eye open and huffily untangles himself from Mike, who groans sleepily and flips to his other side, dragging the blanket over with him.

In the chill of the morning, Will hugs himself and tiptoes into the kitchen.

"Jonathan?" he says quietly, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

His brother turns from the cupboards after grabbing a mug, brow slightly furrowed. "Hey, buddy. What are you doing up?"

"Early riser. Why are you up?"

He shrugs. "Just not very tired, I guess."

Will nods and props himself up on a stool, slumping heavily against

the table.

Jonathan sort of chuckles. "If you're tired, you should go back to bed, Will. It's early, there's time."

"I don't really feel like sleeping anymore, anyway," Will mumbles. It's somewhat true. He'd slept a lot better than he was used to--or at least, more soundly--but he'd been tossing and turning for the last, well, he doesn't *know* how long. So he might as well get an early start. "Hey, um, I'm glad you're okay. Last night was crazy."

"Yeah, me too." Jonathan pours himself a cup of jo. "I'm just glad nothing happened to you."

Will smiles. "How's Nancy?"

"She'll be okay after some sleep, I think." He takes a quick sip of his coffee, then nods his head toward the living room and asks, "How are Mike and Lucas holding up?"

"Wouldn't know. They've been passed out pretty much since we got here."

Jonathan frowns, but a small smile teases at his lips. "I call bullshit, I heard you laughing last night."

Will wishes, desperately wishes, that he had something in his hands to focus on; he fidgets with his fingers a bit to compensate. "That was like two minutes after you walked away, doesn't count."

Jonathan rolls puffy eyes and says, "Okay, well it's good that you guys are in good spirits. We'll need that to get through the day."

"Yeah."

With an uninhibited smile, Jonathan ruffles his hair, then goes and grabs him a glass of OJ. And then they wait.

Max pads into the kitchen nearly an hour later (a few minutes after Jonathan decides to go and lounge for a bit with Nancy while he

finishes his second cup of coffee), sniffing and groaning as she takes the spot next to Will.

“Morning, sunshine,” Will says brightly, grinning as the girl rolls her eyes at him--certainly not a morning person.

She steals the glass in front of him and takes a sip from the last dregs of juice. “Good morning, I guess.”

“Sleep well?”

“Could have been worse.”

Will nods. *Fair enough* . “How’s El?”

She sighs. “Could be worse.” Will flicks an eyebrow upward, just *curious* as to whether that’s a purely physical observation, or if something more is going on. “Okay, yeah, she needs like five days straight of sleep and pure spa treatment, but I don’t know anything about the whole Mike situation.”

“Neither do I. I think we all needed a break from...everything.”

Max nods. “Yeah, true. But, um, I have something else to tell you. And you cannot tell *anyone* .”

Will holds up his hands innocently, gesturing a reassuring *by all means* .

“Okay.” She’s basically just mouthing her story, barely at a whisper, and she throws her gaze over her shoulder a couple times to make sure no one else is listening. “Okay. So, a few nights ago, I may have tried to teach El how to kiss--”

Will’s face breaks in amusement. “You did what?”

“Well, I didn’t. But I think she wanted to kiss me.”

“Oh, and you were just gonna sit on that, Mayfield?” Will says in a mimicky tone, contorting his face annoyingly until Max slaps his arm.

“Shut up!”

“So, did she?”

“No, I pulled away.”

“Why?”

“Well,” she sighs, “I just couldn’t do that to Lucas, and I need time to move on from him. And also, if she hasn’t had time to just herself in her life, like, *ever*, then I think she deserves that. If I need to just be her friend for a while, so be it.”

Will smiles. “How very noble of you.”

“I try.” She returns the smile.

In just a few minutes, El joins the picture, rubbing her eyes and asking quietly, “What time is it?”

“Early,” Will offers.

“We should make breakfast!” Max says, sitting up a bit in her seat.

El smiles, small and intimate, and rests her head against Max’s shoulder. Though Max’s face illuminates almost immediately, and Will desperately wants to tease her, he decides to be a good friend this once and turn his attention to refilling his glass.

“That sounds nice,” says El, after enough time has passed that Will is putting juice back into the fridge.

Max perks up considerably. “Well, what do you guys have?”

“Eggs.” El smiles mischievously.

“Hm,” Max taps her fingertips together on the table, pondering. “Perhaps, though we gotta find something a bit more substantial than waffles for today.”

El pouts a little bit but ultimately goes along with it, moving so that Max can stand and mutter, “Shut up,” to a subtly grinning Will.

And then they make breakfast. It’s a rather messy affair; the three of

them bump into each other constantly and eventually it turns into a competition of who can screw who over the most in the short time it takes to prepare what food they found (waffles, a few eggs, some slightly-bruised apples, and bread). Max actually comes up next to Will and fakes bumping into him while he cracks an egg, and he startles so bad that some of the whites fall out and he whisper-shouts, "Max!" In retaliation, El comes up behind Max while she's buttering toast and covers her eyes, and so Max turns around and chases her, laughing all the way, until they end up in a Twister-esque tangle of arms attempting to grab the butter knife from each other.

Will carefully trails behind Max, and with an affirmative nod at El, snatches the knife and backs away, giggling when Max exclaims, "Traitor!"

He shrugs. "Sorry, Max, I'm doing the best I can for the greater good."

She scoffs. "You learning about utilitarianism was a mistake."

Will cackles at the outlandish accusation, eyebrows soaring up with a, "What the fuck are you on about?" and he is thoroughly entertained by how sore of a loser Max could be, though she joins in the hysterics in mere seconds. El nearly doubles over with them, face flush red with amusement.

"Could you clowns *please* be quiet?" comes Mike's whiny voice from the living room. He pulls a pillow over his head.

"Okay, settle down, grumpypants," Will retorts, voice mockingly pouty. Max and El crack up even worse, and he can hardly form another phrase, so he doesn't try--who knew you could have so much fun in the face of death?

"Oh good, you guys got an early start." Nancy enters the kitchen briskly, snagging a sliced apple from the cutting board Will was working on. "I'm gonna make some calls, you guys get some food in your system." As she moves through the living room, she kicks at Mike's leg, following up with, "And *you* need to get your ass up."

"Okay, *mom* ."

Nancy narrows her eyes. "I'll take that, Mike. Get *up* ." She shakes Lucas's shoulder gently, and says, "Hey, we gotta get a move on."

Lucas, who had somehow slept through the ruckus, nods silently, and after a few moments, forces himself to sit up, albeit slowly. He yawns about twenty times before he can get himself to stand. "Morning," he says to no one in particular.

The trio in the kitchen all waves with their own variations of, "Good morning!" and El offers to take him a drink, like the angel she is.

When Jonathan finally returns from his morning contemplation, and the two groggy boys make their way into the kitchen (both stealing from the plates that Will was portioning out for everyone), they all have a weird moment; a moment of realization, of acceptance--no more funny business, no more time to just relax. It's go time. It's like dust settles on all chatter.

"So, what now?"

Notes for the Chapter:

thank you all so much for reading!! i really appreciate the lovely comments y'all have left for me <3 i hope you enjoyed this chapter (sorry it's later than usual), and i can't wait to keep going on this journey with you guys.

also, as this fic will be wrapping up soon(ish), please lmk if there is anything that you guys would like to see in others in the future! i'd love to accept prompts or something to show my gratitude for everyone reading/following me. anyway i hope everyone has a good day/night <3

12. el

Summary for the Chapter:

It's all black, all dark, all damp, until she falls and falls into more water, rushing to greet her nostrils and mouth, a 'hello hello hello' soaking through her clothes. She clammers backward, knees digging into the moist, warm sand, knuckles grasping for something strong to ground her. Her eyes dart around: birds, a tide rushing forward like a constant, breeze bringing scents of dry sand and sunblock and salt, perfect color-wheel blue sky, glaring white sun. The beach, the beach that Max always talked about with a dreamy look in her eye, like she could see herself dancing along the shore, snacking on pre-packed sandwiches, kicking over sandcastles, and giggling with happy parents. Seemingly.

Notes for the Chapter:

tumblr: @lesbian-hopper

Cheery sunlight poured through the curtains of El's room, an uninvited invitation to rise and shine. Subtle sounds of life leaked through the crevices of the door, piquing a subtly embedded instinct of curiosity, immediately lighting her nerves on fire in pursuit of the knowledge of who is up and why.

However, when she tried to move, she found that her limbs still felt like they had been infused with cement, and the muscles in her shoulders and arms ached like the burn of a million suns. A low whimper caught in her breath when she forced herself forward, sitting painfully; only the firm hand intertwined with her arm forced her to slow down, and with it, Max. Max, ginger hair plastered against her cheek, murmuring something nonsensical into the stuffy air.

"El, go back to sleep. It's early."

El laid back against the pillows slowly, carefully, wincing at the exertion

screaming throughout her body. However, she felt significantly better than the previous night's jumbled mess; the sharp pain, pressure thick in her sinuses, strangling her from the inside out.

And she thought about her last interactions with Max, before the Mindflyer came and wrought havoc on all of them. Before they Party (or, most of it) reunited. The sleepy, secret moments of holding each other in the dark; moments of panic ignited by the terrifying flame that was Billy in her head, soothed only by a gentle voice or pale arms pulling her into a welcoming lap. The half-a-second, lingering moment when El had almost leaned into the girl's pretty red lips.

But Max had pulled away. Fast. Panicked. Disinterested.

El couldn't figure it out.

"Max?"

"Yeah?"

"Is everything okay?"

Max scrunched up her nose to sniffle, then nuzzled her head further into the pillow, like a sweet little puppy or something. El smiled.

"It will be," Max finally whispered. "Go back to sleep."

With a cloudy mind and an aching body, El rested her head against the girl's arm and slipped in and out of consciousness for a little while longer.

After breakfast with Will and Max, the family gathers around the table, the silence brimming over with whispers of anxiety. It feels like no one knows what to do next, and everyone longs to just hit pause while they figure it out. At least that's how El feels.

But she can't. Not before she saves her family. And that starts with finding Billy.

She slips back into her room and ties her blindfold after laying out pictures of her four targets: Billy, Heather, and Mr. and Mrs.

Holloway. Mrs. Driscoll. Maybe it's not too late.

Deep breaths , she tells herself, easing into the state of mind in which she can see beyond her surroundings. It's dark, as always; wet and unpleasant, and not quite inviting. Something she's found, however, is that humans will make a home anywhere, no matter how gruesome the conditions. She just hopes that someday, she won't have to try so hard.

It's okay for now, though. It's familiar. Slowly, she pads around in the inky black of her mind.

"Billy?" she tries out, wavering in her speech. "Heather?"

No response.

Years go by with El spinning in circles, chasing people who can't chase back, people who would like to kill her. It's an odd dichotomy.

Wisps whip past her, she swears, echoes of these people, so close, but just far enough away that she can't place them. Just misses touching them by the tips of her fingers. For a while, for a while, for a while; tissues form a pyramid by her real side and she's grasping for nothingness in the dark until--

Until she finds him.

The center of her forehead pounds as she slides off the blindfold, blinking painfully at the light from the window. Slowly, El gets to her feet and tosses the bloody tissues in the trash, flicks off the television, and stacks the photos that led her to her findings. Her fingers drag over the photo of Billy, her goal, the key to figuring this all out. The one who wants her dead.

With a chill in her heart, El makes her way to the living room, just as a conversation erupts--or, rather, starts to die down.

"She'll be okay," Will says, quiet and firm, determined and careful.

By his side, Mike nods. His leg flounders, living an anxious life of its

own, but he presses his lips into a line and ultimately seems to let a breath out.

“Yeah,” Max adds. “She will be. She has to be. We’ll take care of her as much as she’s taken care of us, because she’s saved us so much, you know? She deserves everything we can give back, and I don’t even know if that would be enough...”

It would be , El pleads silently, heart fluttering at the utterance of the words.

Lucas chimes in, “It has to be, Max. We’ll give her everything we’ve got.”

Then something beautiful happens. Nancy smiles, eyes crinkling, with a soft, “Yeah.” Jonathan, gazing at her, mirrors the expression, then looks to his brother, who looks to Mike, who ducks his head down with a timid expression. Mike takes Will’s hand, and Lucas’s too, and eventually they’re all smiling and holding hands until Max tears up and pulls her hand away, swiping at the tears with a quiet, “Freakin’ nerds. What is this, a cult?”

Everyone chuckles quietly in response, Nancy lifting a knuckle to her own damp eyes, and El takes the moment to step forward and introduce her presence.

She really can’t help the slight smile lifting her cheeks, though she doesn’t want to seem like she was eavesdropping. “What’s going on here?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Mike says quickly, and it’s only then that El notices that he hasn’t dropped Will’s hand. He does now. “We’re just, um, getting ready.”

El nods shortly and announces, “I found him.”

Once again, everyone murmurs in the quiet of their dire situation, the air buzzing with nerves as El grabs a snack. Some water. Fuel for just a bit more of the hellish experience she has to take herself through, because that’s what it is right now: just a little bit longer, just a little

bit more. A little bit more until someone makes a move. Billy sitting in his room, staring coldly through El's soul. She takes these moments to herself, holding the cereal in between her fingertips, memories belonging to her mother decorating her mind while she breathes in and out, in and out. Taking a grace period of sorts to have something other than Billy or death or the plight of her loved ones in her head.

However, as she returns to the living room, she's smacked with reality.

--we have to find the source."

"Billy knows it," El answers to Nancy, stepping forward with a certain confidence and assurance that she knows she'll need for the coming hours. "Billy's been there. To the source."

"Yeah, but--" Mike begins.

"It's a trap. I know." She offers him a fleeting glance, then shifts her attention back to his sister. "We can't go to Billy, but I think there's another way. A way for me to see where he's been."

That's how they end up crowded in the living room, El flicking on static for what must be the millionth time today, settling back against the coffee table. Mike crawls next to her on the floor, crouches down in his gangly boy way, rests an arm on the table, clears his throat.

"El, I just wanted to say..." Concern floods every corner of his dark, dark eyes, looking her over like she's in his hands and he's trying not to let her slip away. "I--it's great that you're doing this. Be safe, and um..." he trails off, glancing around the room, eyes landing on something she doesn't pay any mind to, and then he's more solid. "Let us know if you need to stop. We're here."

El smiles briefly, overwhelmed once again by the people in her life showing her love. Showing her family. She takes his fingers against her palm and turns to him.

"You trust me?"

Though Mike isn't prone to relaxing right now, his expression softens for a millisecond, and he looks more youthful--more like the boy she met about a million years ago. "Of course, yeah. I'm just worried."

"You don't need to be." El smiles. "I can do this." She repeats it, like a--what's the word-- *mantra* , she thinks. *It's okay. I'm okay. I'm safe . I can do this.*

Mike simply smiles. "Of course." He settles back onto a cushioned seat, drawing his knees into his chest.

I can do this .

Screaming. Falling. Everything, once Billy sees her and snatches her arm into his grasp, settles into dismay, bedlam, unrest, disorder. *He can't hurt me. Not in here* . Though she's falling, disappearing into the water always at her feet, and she's horrified and surely dying, all that she feels against her throat is a soft whimper. The others won't worry too much, *lucky them* .

It's all black, all dark, all damp, until she falls and falls into more water, rushing to greet her nostrils and mouth, a *hello hello hello* soaking through her clothes. She clambers backward, knees digging into the moist, warm sand, knuckles grasping for something strong to ground her. Her eyes dart around: birds, a tide rushing forward like a constant, breeze bringing scents of dry sand and sunblock and salt, perfect color-wheel blue sky, glaring white sun. The beach, the beach that Max always talked about with a dreamy look in her eye, like she could see herself dancing along the shore, snacking on pre-packed sandwiches, kicking over sandcastles, and giggling with happy parents. Seemingly.

El makes her way to her feet unsteadily, the whole world turning over and over, and then a distorted voice adds to the confusion. Then quickly becomes a rock in this new atmosphere.

"El, are you okay?" comes Mike's urgent voice, dangerously close to breaking. She breathes.

“I’m okay.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’m... on a beach.”

El reaches for something steady in front of her to balance the rockiness, but it doesn’t exist. She hugs herself as Lucas adds to the conversation with his ever-present logic, correct and stabilizing and firm. *There aren’t any beaches in Hawkins.* Oddly enough, El stands a little taller.

“What else do you see?” says Max.

And then there’s a woman. *Pretty* . She has windswept, sunny-golden hair, and a white tunic-dress blowing happily in the breeze. Radiant blue eyes, matching the sky and the sea around her, illuminating the beaming smile that she meets El with.

Except it’s not for El.

It’s for Billy.

The happy memory is swallowed into something heinous, dark, out to harm. Previously glowing skies are tornadoed out, replaced with dark black and red hues, whirlwinds in the air whistling by El’s ear. Rapid air surrounding the scene whips against her cheeks and pushes against her legs and her core but she pushes herself through, following the story that Billy wants to tell. One of a needlessly cruel father, of the monster born from that, the bully that mirrors the abuse onto other small, helpless victims. A mother leaves and ridicule and heartbreak is left behind, fear and anger against the world and an innocent sister--scratch that. Not-sister.

It’s still harsh winds and dark skies, ominously red and swirling in her vision ahead of her, but El makes her way into a clearing with no more people, no more story, no more history. Lightning and swiveling clouds are reflected against the satiny black of a car with a broken windshield, and as El moves forward, lifts her eyes, she finds herself staring into the eye of a storm.

“I think I found it. The source.”

Max floats through the ruckus, a wisp for El to catch in the air. A breath of reality. “Where, El? Where are you?”

El swallows the thickening air, prepares her dry mouth to declare, “Brimborn Steelworks.”

Moments, minutes, hours later, Mike says, “El, El we found it. Get out of there. Get out!”

Back through what feels like an excruciating eternity of Billy’s memories bounding through her body, as she silently screeches and pulls herself into reality, and then she’s alive and real and in her living room.

She feels like she can exhale again.

Until she realizes it’s an empty space. No one is there.

“Mike?” she calls out, quietly at first, then her desperation for something real, someone real, to grab her and remind her of her life, overpowers everything. “Max! Will! Max! Mike?”

Then comes a voice. Real. Disturbingly real. “They can’t hear you.” Billy emerges from the other room, skin slick with sweat, wifebeater sticking to his skin, hair stuck to his face. “You shouldn’t have looked for me. Because now I see you.” He puts out the bum of a cigarette. “Now we can all see you.”

El shrieks, but it’s caught in her throat, choking her as she steps back, away from the thing in front of her. Her body is screaming *threat!* *Threat!* And she trembles as she steps away, as she can almost feel the others moving but she can’t warn hers, as Billy continues.

“You... let us in.” El winces at the memories of the lab breaking back into her mind, chest heaving out of her own control, frozen. “And now... you’re going to have to let us stay.”

El’s nails dig into her palm, and she tries to draw a voice from nowhere, from Max, from Mike, from Will, something to ground her and to give her something to fight for. Because otherwise, right now,

she can't. She's utterly stuck as Billy talks.

"Don't you see? All this time, we've been building it... for you." She's sure both of them shudder, different reasons. "All that work, all that pain, all of it... for you."

She backs into a table. Holds it.

"And now it's time. Time to end it." Billy's face twists in an ugly, inhuman way. "And we are going to end you. And when you are gone, we are going to end your friends."

Finally, finally she can speak. "No!"

"And then we are going to end... " a tear drops onto his cheek, "everyone."

Something cracks. "Get away!" In her chest, in her head, her arms and legs and down to her feet, she uses everything she has to get him and his words away from her. From her friends. From everyone.

"No!" She shouts, and finally she's back in reality. Red hot tears streak down her face and she's scooting back, away *somehow* from the demons that existed mere seconds ago, adrenaline still pumping through her veins.

"El, you're okay! It's okay."

Mike takes hold of her arms and pulls her into his, allowing her to cling to him and his elbow and absolutely anything solid.

And then comes Max. El can't see her at first, but she feels her get closer, settle behind El's back. Until El shifts back, hands clawing at the ground and then Max's shoulders, and then she's diving into the embrace. And Max gives her exactly what she needs: a steady, solid pressure. Hard yet soft and reassuring. A hand sifting through her hair, meaningless but gentle words against El's temple.

Will is at her side for no more than a second, but mutters softly, "I'll go get you something to drink, okay?"

"We've got you," Mike adds, squeezing her shoulder.

The others bustle around for a few minutes, chattering or sitting quietly and waiting, waiting, waiting. Will brings El some water and sits up on the couch by her and Max.

“Did he do anything to you?” Max asks quietly, hand still rested firmly with El’s. Her braids brush against her shoulders as she sits back, face focused intently on El.

El shakes her head. “No, he didn’t touch me.”

“So, he just scared you?” She says it like she’s speaking from memory, rather than a guess, and El looks at her painfully.

El nods, eyes on their linked knuckles, on something she can feel and ground herself in. “Yeah.”

“He’s... like that. More than you’d think.”

Grimacing, El meets Max’s soft cerulean gaze. “Max... his dad... he’s awful.”

“He is.” Max gnaws at her lip. “He is. Always has been, I think. But Billy absorbed it, too. He didn’t fight it.”

El nods. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Hey.” Max meets her with a fierce look, watery eyes ablaze, fist tightening in her own. “Don’t you ever be sorry for him. For what he’s done.”

El smiles, and in that stupid, desperate moment, she thinks about kissing Max again. Kissing her with all her wild baby hairs framing her face, hand already wrapped up in her own, leaning in close and saying all the right things. It’s rough and it’s soft and perfect for them. She looks away and tries to ignore it.

Just as El is thinking she can catch a breath, they’re all tripping over each other’s feet, scrambling outside to see the ‘fireworks’ lighting up the starry night sky, and the dark grumbling creature launching toward them in the distance.

Just as El is thinking maybe they can block it out long enough to form a better plan, can get away with boarding up the cabin and boasting guns, Nancy is yelling, “Get away from the window!”

And they do. El, and all of the others, form a circle, backs to each other, defending each other from every side.

It breaks through their only barrier, the foundations of the cabin. Panting, gasping, screeching in terror, El backs against the wall and with either hand, pushes Will and Max with her. Gaining some purchase. Saving them for another second.

Jonathan wacks at the appendage coming toward them, and when he's knocked back and winded, lying on the floor, ready to be attacked, Nancy shoots. She squares her shoulders and aims and shoots until she can't anymore. And that's enough.

It's hard to watch her go from a sturdy stance, sure and messy and wild and ready, to backed against the wall and terrified. It's enough.

El soon holds two of them at bay, a mere arms-length away, straining against the constraints her mind, begging and pleading that she'll be able to do this. And then she's sure. Horrified, but she looks back, and she sees Mike cowering, Will pressed against the wall, Max fixing the most heartbreaking gaze on her; and it's enough to get her through.

She screams because it really, really does take a lot from her, but she slams her flexed fingers to her sides and watches as the two limbs crumble at her feet. It's a mind-numbingly powerful feeling. But it's dangerous, because then she's grabbed by her ankle, dangling like some silly little carrot in a cartoon from the roof of the cabin. Mike clings to her arms and in a heartbeat Max has joined him, and Will, and Jonathan.

The blood rushes to her face and she's being sucked in by a gooey, ferocious beast, one whose sole aim is to kill *her* . Once she's gone, her friends. Everyone.

“Nancy, shoot it!” Jonathan shouts.

Several shots go off. They don't work. El thrashes around, trying to keep her legs from the reach of the mouth, desperately crawling in the air.

Max yells next, voice cracking, "Come on, Lucas!"

And Lucas smashes it over and over with an ax as Nancy shoots and El is sure she's going to dissolve in the air, either from the dizziness she's feeling or the amount of sound killing her ears right now or the fear of what comes next.

Eventually, finally, Lucas hits it hard enough that El goes cascading to the ground, directly onto Mike. His arms circle her immediately.

"El! El, are you okay?"

She grabs at his face, convulsing, tongue stuck in her throat as she realizes *it's not over*. It's stuck, she's stuck, and her leg is screaming as Mike rips the last of the Flayer away. Maybe she is too. It's so loud, and her leg burns, she doesn't know what to make out of it.

It's really not over. The tiny bit from her leg screeches and darts away, but the Mindflayer still grins down at them from the hole in the roof. El wants to grin right back, to step up and show it the justice of the century. For now, she has to just keep them all alive.

Stumbling forward, injured leg nearly willing to let her fall (traitor), El sets her feet shoulder-width apart, throws her arms up, and focuses all of her energy that she has left on this. She's screeching, the creature is groaning and screaming back, and as she drags her arms apart, like they're magnets willing to stick together, the monster disintegrates and falls into a gooey web above them.

El falls back against Max, and she grabs at the girl, attempting to stand on her own as Max says firmly, "El, stop, I've got you." It's quiet amidst the yelling of, "Go!" and "Hurry!" and "Move!" surrounding them, but it's enough to shock El in her flurried state. Max means it.

Mike swoops in to help her support El, and El lets herself fall back against them, doing her part to lumber forwards but that part is not a

lot.

They manage to get into the car. Mike yells for Nancy to drive, and El falls back against the seat, lets her head smack the headrest.

A few moments of rest. Not quite, but something like stability. Something that could be framed for tranquility. Mike squeezed in tight next to her, Max holding El's hand with both of her own, distracting her from her excruciating leg. After a while, she can barely feel the leg. She doesn't even think about the past few hours. She just watches as the lights go by, drifting in and out of her line of sight, influencing how she sees everything, until they skirt wildly into the parking lot of a store. Still not over.

Notes for the Chapter:

hi so i am SO sorry that it's taken forever to update. i've just been struggling a lot lately with keeping up with school and work and the season change is always icky and draining for me. however, i am really really proud of this chapter and it's really late as im typing this but i just had to update, and i was so excited to share this with you. i really loved writing with el's 'voice' this chapter, and i included some fun little quirks in her narration that are just cool to me (im a big nerd sorry sjfhgksdfjgh). it's only been lightly edited so if there are any stupid grammar mistakes, y'all caught me slipping, im sorry. but yeah i feel so productive and happy to be posting again, so hopefully the next chapter will follow soon! anyway, as always, please feel free to comment or follow me on tumblr and chill w me there!!

13. mike

Notes for the Chapter:

slides a chapter in your hand after more than a year heyyy besties

tumblr: dykenance

Mike watches his sister break into the general store, the glass piercing his ears and shattering across the linoleum tile floor. He watches as she clears a path and leads them in after her. Watches as every fiber of normalcy in his life seems to slip away once again, this time without even a year's breath in between.

He can't just watch, though. This is happening to them. Right now. El slumps further between Mike and Max with every step forward, grimacing and gripping onto his shirt sleeve, and he has to take every effort to assure that he doesn't drop her in the shards of glass clawing at their feet. A hand touches his back as they heave El through the door and down an aisle to set her down. One hint of security.

El sits back with a wince, brows furrowing painfully, a whine escaping her lips. With a worried glance, carefully masked with confidence, Nancy peels back her pant leg, revealing an oozing, swollen, purple-red wound, more painful than anything Mike has ever seen. Max breathes out, "Oh shit," across from him. After some thorough assessment, Mike figures he'd throw up if he had anything left in his stomach.

No, he has to be strong for this. It's the least he can do.

Mike forces a blank stare on El's leg. Lines blur in his vision, those between fiction and reality; maybe it's the sleep deprivation, maybe it's the fact that they've pushed through so much in just a day or two. At this point, he doesn't even feel worried, or scared, or sad. He just feels numb. Numb, thinking of how horrible their most recent memories had been, of how horrible this is, how horrible he is for not being able to stomach it for her. To step up any more than he is, just sitting there, watching.

A hand at his back reminds him to breathe, and a world of color (or, well, dimmed neon fluorescents) paints itself back in front of his eyes. He wants to reach back, take Will's hand, give back everything he's able to offer Mike with a simple touch; or, at least, he would like to offer some comfort back. But he's just stunned.

Finally seeming to break an eternal, silent moment, Nancy wets a cloth with alcohol and leans in to touch it to El's leg, quickly stopped by Max's objection, "What - what - hey, what are you doing?"

A blink. "I'm cleaning the wound."

"No," Max scoffs, "first, we need to stop the bleeding, then clean, then disinfect, then bandage." She stares down at everyone in the circle with wide eyes. "I skateboard, trust me." Everyone seems to collectively shrug it off and follow her lead. Then, she snaps Mike back to attention again, saying, "Mike, hold this. Keep pressure on it, nice and firm." So, he grabs hold of the napkin, staring at his hand as though it's a separate appendage from his body, and holds a firm and gentle pressure to El's screaming leg. El groans and grabs his wrist. "We're gonna need water, soap..."

Watching Max intently, Nancy nods. "Yeah, okay." She and Jonathan jump up to search through the pharmacy section.

A few feet away, Lucas empties his bag, and every little trinket cascades loudly across the tiles. He looks expectantly at Max. "Does any of this help?"

"No," Max answers shortly, "go get me a washcloth and a bowl."

"A bowl?"

"*Lucas !*"

Will appears from behind Mike, walks over to Lucas, and smacks his arm with a ' *c'mon* ,' sort of look. Mike follows the movements with his eyes.

"You can go with him - with them." Max's eyes are trained on El's leg, but she glances up for a moment. "If you want to. I've got her."

Mike feels caught. But he's no use sitting there.

"Oh, yeah, okay. I'll go uh, find something." With some quick cooperation, probably the best the two have ever achieved, Mike lifts his hand from El's leg and exchanges positions with Max. As he jumps up to catch up with the other boys, Max smiles gently at El, holding tight pressure on her wound and El's hand with her free one.

Okay. They're good.

It's a change, a regression, perhaps, running off to look for his friends and away from fussing over his girlfriend. It's been a long time. He knows this. They've all changed. But Mike feels different... again. Maybe not quite like he's going back, but like he's returning home to himself. Like there's a piece of him, a nerdy, neglected piece of him, that maybe he'll have some time for now.

Lucas, Dustin, Will - they're still his best friends. It doesn't matter that they've changed, or that they're older and weirder and complicated. Their promise still stands from years ago, and he intends to stick to it.

"There's a reason this warning label says '18 or older'. This sucker is filled with 150 grains of black powder. AKA gunpowder. Strap two of these together, and it'll be bigger than an M-80. Five of them? We got ourselves a stick of dynamite!"

Lucas examines a package eagerly, while Will lifts himself on tiptoe to read the label over his shoulder.

"That's a great idea."

Lucas looks up at Mike, blinks in surprise, then smiles. "Thanks, man."

Will asks, "Is El alright?"

"As good as she can be. Max has it covered." Mike takes in a breath, looks between Lucas and Will, who just nod, and says, "Listen, I um -" he blanks. He's usually a speech guy, great with words, the best damn dungeon master in Indiana - hopefully, he hasn't lost all that. "I hope after all this shit dies down, if we're alive on the other side -

well, when, I mean, hopefully - uh, I hope we can... move on. Get better, you know.”

The boys opposite him share a look, then back, and it’s like they click into place after months of being detached.

“Yeah,” Lucas says, the corner of his mouth lifting in a more genuine smile, “that’d be cool. I think we owe Will a game of D&D.”

Will rolls his eyes. “I’m over it, Lucas. Really. I’m not forcing anything anymore.”

“I dunno, I kinda miss it.” Lucas shrugs. “In any event, Mike, you better learn not to be a dumbass about your girlfriend. I can’t teach you *everything* .” He lifts some of the heavy-duty fireworks with a strained grunt and moves past Mike. “I’m gonna go see what Max thinks of these. Be right back.” And with that, he disappears down the aisle.

Will busies himself with a pack of smaller firecrackers, frowning down at it in concentration, completely abandoning their original supply search.

Mike has never felt such a strain in trying to converse with his best friend. They’re on a good page, he thinks, or at least... a vague one. Will pulled away last night - but the preceding conversation was good.

“No more D&D, huh?” he says quietly, wandering to the front of a nearby aisle to look around for kitchenware.

“Well, I won’t be the one to suggest it.” He shakes his head and chuckles. “I’m over that embarrassment.”

“It’s not embarrassing.”

“Don’t give me that, Mike.”

“It’s not!”

“It is . I accept that. I just miss when things were... easier.” In contrast to his easy expression, the boy’s grip on the fireworks

tightens, which seems dangerous until Mike reminds himself they're not lit. Will clears his throat. "That's all."

Mike, ever the communicator, ignores the tension and smiles as he approaches the boy, tossing a pack of matches back and forth between his palms. "Remember our Fourth of July game three years ago? That was one of my favorites."

"Back when Nancy was cool." The smile doesn't quite reach his face. He holds out a hand when Mike gets too close, pointing between the fireworks and the matches, and Mike stops in his tracks with an embarrassed laugh. "Yeah, that was a great game. It was sweet..." Will's face pinches into a frown, and then he says, "but I don't want to live in memories anymore, Mike."

Yikes. "Oh, okay." So, maybe they're not as great as Mike thought. "What's that - um - what?"

Will finally meets Mike's eye with a sigh, the remnants of a smile dissolving, and then he zones out to Mike's shoulders. "It's just that... that's all I've had for months now. I figured I'd try to go back to feeling like a kid, a *normal* kid with *normal* friends, but it's never gonna happen. I got the message. Finally." A laugh chokes and dies in his throat.

And looking down at him now, shy and reserved, Mike can't help but see the boy who turned back to him, eyes bright, unwilling to lie about the fate of his dice those few years ago, however much it feels like a lifetime away.

The boy who made him smile when his dad grounded him for the first time when they were 8, who held his hand during scary movies, who always had a quippy remark to make him laugh. The boy who said yes.

That boy is gone, fading right in front of him, and it's all his fault. He never dared to face what was there.

After a quick glance to see if anyone's approaching them, Mike grabs Will's arm and pulls him to one of the back aisles, back by the cornerstone of cleaning supplies and frozen food, emergency exit

signs plastered above the door. Will looks up at him, confused, and hugs himself tightly.

Yeah, better now, in the middle of this clusterfuck, than never. "I don't want to be just a memory."

"Well, just 'cause you don't want that doesn't mean you're not."

Mike scowls. "Dude, where the hell is this coming from? I thought we were okay last night. I thought... we could make this work."

"Is that even what you want?" Will counters, eyebrow flying up as he speaks. "Or do you just not know how else to act around me? Do you feel sorry for me or something?"

"No, I just feel sorry, Will, I didn't think that was a crime." Mike isn't prepared to cry in this stupid convenience store, he doesn't think he has it in him; he feels like kicking something. Maybe knocking some bottles off the shelves. They're all exhausted, adrenaline the only reason he's not falling victim to glued sleepy eyes, and now a wave of anxiety washes over him. "Do you even trust me anymore?"

Will's eyes widen, then harden, forcing back a typical sensitivity that Mike knows. "You say all the right things, Mike, but I don't really know what you want from me. And if it's the same for you, that's fine. Let's just not talk about it." He lets out a shaky breath, pushing past that, because they could never seem to just 'let it go,' then continues, "It's hard to know what you mean and what you're saying because we could be dead tonight."

"And why would I say anything but the *truth* if I thought we were going to die?"

"Because you just have to be a goddamn hero, don't you? I mean, tell me, what are the chances of you *not* running after El the second this is all over?" He must know it's a low-blow because he curls in on himself more.

Mike's lips press into a line. "I ran after you, Will. A day after breaking up with her, I ran after *you*."

Something causes Will to look up at him, something familiar,

something aching; he just gazes at Mike, waiting, considering.

It doesn't last.

His eyes flicker between Mike and the front of the store, where the rest of the gang must be waiting, watching. "We better go."

"But Will, come on - "

"We don't have time for this," Will says tiredly. "Let's just go."

Mike bites his tongue, and Will doesn't even wait to walk away. "Fine."

The next few hours are absolute madness.

El kicks the shit out of some guys at Starcourt, they find Dustin and his crew ('You flung that thing like a Hot Wheel!'), find out that their little group faced off with Russians ('Those were *Russians*?!'), and then suddenly El is on the ground screaming and holding her leg.

It's some of the scariest stuff Mike has ever seen.

All he can manage as he stares down at her leg, squirming and swollen on its own accord, is to say her name, try to get her attention away from the pain.

It doesn't work.

But it's Jonathan who thinks to get it out. "Just keep her talking, keep her awake, okay?"

So while he runs off to find the supplies for something so intense, Mike focuses his attention on El. *Breathe* . "Hey, hey, hey, stay awake stay awake stay awake." He looks up at his companions. "Let's get her on this side, on this side." He guides El backward into his lap, holding her steady while she whimpers through the pain. Max scoots up next to him and offers her hand for stability. "It's gonna be okay."

Steve's friend Robin tells a fun little story about soccer or something

that Mike doesn't really bother wrapping his mind around, and finally, Jonathan comes running back.

"Okay, alright, El? This is gonna hurt like hell, okay?" is the warning she gets, and with a spoon to clench down on and a few hands to hold, Jonathan gets ready.

"Okay," she groans, propping herself up, gripping tightly onto her surroundings.

Jonathan hesitates.

And while Mike thanks whatever deity out there that he's not in his position, he says, "Do it," because El's labored breaths are beating against his legs and it's painful to even listen to.

"Okay." With that, he digs the knife into the girl's leg.

Somehow El's screams are even more excruciating than before, her face bright red, empty sobs of pain wracking her forward. Jonathan digs beneath her skin with his fingers now, groping around for the flayed bit stuck in her system, and El grasps the hands on her shoulders tight enough to kill.

It's eventually too much and El spits the spoon from her mouth, howling, "No, stop it! Just stop! Stop!" A few breaths collapse inside of her and she cries as she says, "I can do it."

She breaks out of Mike's grasp, insists she can do it herself, and with some extreme effort, she does.

And as glass from storefronts surrounding them shatters all around their weary bodies from her effort, Mike focuses his mind on how she must have some massive nerve damage.

And finally, some adults show up. Their parents.

Well, El's. Joyce. Some random old man. Karen and Ted Wheeler are nowhere to be seen, but hey, what's new?

Alright, year three. A little show circle of sorts, a pause in their game of life, preparing to take down another villain they couldn't think up in their wildest dreams. Mike's head is spinning but with the brainpower of his understanding of the Mindflayer's hunt for El, the adults, Dustin, and Lucas's 10-year-old sister, they seem to find the perfect plan.

And it's nice to catch up with Dustin, with all ten seconds that they have to do so.

Dustin and Erica go with Robin and Steve to man his radio for communication and navigation purposes, Will and his mom have an emotional goodbye nearby, and Mike waits off to the side with Lucas and Max, waiting while El and Hopper catch up.

And with a few minutes to think, Mike's just, like, at his limit.

He's tired of this stupid monster, tired of his personal life, tired of and because of everything. And maybe he wishes he could lean on his mom and dad, or at least his sister, but she's busy too.

But then he thinks about how El must feel absolutely drained, exhausted, and hurt, and he pulls the last dregs of his care in the world to protect that. She needs to be safe. It's not about him.

So finally, feeling like they're running out of time with every passing minute, he pipes up, "Hey, we should probably go." Go hide in some bunker that an apparently sane person had built in his house. Cool.

He and Max approach slowly as Hopper and El share a heartfelt embrace. He ducks down and grabs El's hand, supporting her weight, and Max joins on the other side to help.

"Mike?"

He turns. Braces himself. Lucas silently moves to support El's side in his absence.

Hopper takes a deep breath, then simply says, "Be careful."

All Mike can do is nod and catch up with his friends.

They crowd into his mom's car, Nancy cursing at the dysfunctional wheel, but it only takes about twenty seconds for them to realize that Billy has arrived. There are lights in the distance. Car lights. Aimed at them, engine running.

Everyone's shouting "Go, go, go!" and throwing themselves out of the car and Mike yells, "Be careful!" because they're literally dragging El from the trunk, and he lets her loop her arm around his neck again while they stumble toward the door.

Okay, back inside. Mike fumbles with his walkie and tries (unsuccessfully) to contact the 'Scoops Troop.' He attempts to let them know that Billy has disabled their car and they need help. Once they all accept that it's fruitless, and for the moment, their part of the plan is ruined, a backup plan is formed. They just need a new ignition cable.

The gang topples the mall car display (that El had flipped 'like a Hot Wheel').

And Mike gets to have fun with physics.

When that's all over, Mike and Max watch as El digs a Coke can out of the trash, sets it on a table, and stares at it. Focuses. And it seems, in that moment, that El is literally, not just by the force of adults, powerless.

From his side, Max mutters, "Mike." She keeps her eyes fixed on the ceiling. The ceiling cracking under the weight of a monster.

Ah, shit.

He yells, " *Nancy !*"

With no time to waste, Mike grabs onto El and Max's arms and darts out of the way just as the Mindflayer collapses through the ceiling.

It all happens so quickly, but as Mike anticipates the Mindflayer's huge, rotting arm to hunt him, Max, and El down, time couldn't move any slower. They stumble through the Gap, move out of the way just on time and time again, hiding behind store counters, and then the creature is right next to Mike's face, creeping closer and closer - totally prepared to murder him, as long as it means it gets to El.

Someone saves his life at the last second. A loud *pop* in the distance sends the arm flying.

With a short window opened up for their move, Mike grabs El's arm, counting on her to hold tight to Max, and darts for the back stairwell. They just have to get out in time to catch up with the others, hop back in the now (hopefully) functioning car, and get the hell out of there.

Except by the time they get outside, Billy is crawling out of his own car.

And he zeroes in on them. Immediately.

"Shit, go go go go go!"

Mike supports El in turning back to the mall, *again*, and Max, fortunately, thinks to dart forward and slam the button to the gate to block Billy from chasing them. It's more stumbling and El groaning in pain until they get to the door - the *locked* door - and Mike has to figure out how to get it open.

It's a short-lived breather.

"Billy."

Max is standing just outside the doorway, pleading with a possessed Billy vessel to, "Please, stop, you don't have to do this." With Billy plundering toward her, she sucks in a breath and continues shakily, "Please, Billy, I'm Max, I'm your -"

She doesn't get to finish.

Billy backhands her the moment he approaches, and Mike sprints

forward for her, leaving El to lean against the door.

He attempts to block him from moving any further. Unsuccessfully.

The only thing he processes before collapsing is his face approaching the pipe.

When Mike first comes to, he's vaguely aware of the sensation of blinking; dim lights all around him flash against his face, and the realization of that brings on a dull ache in his face. He winces, tries to move, and only then does he hear a voice calling for him.

"... can you hear me? Mike? Mike! Are you okay?" Max is shaking his shoulder, staring down at him with wild eyes, a deep red mark popping on her face. She calms slightly when she notices he's conscious. "Hey, come on." Max helps Mike to his feet, bears some of his weight as he stabilizes himself. "You okay?"

Mike nods shortly, glancing around at the dark, empty room, finally catching up to his thoughts, where they were before he was knocked out. "Where's El?"

Max's shoulders tense. She shakes her head in confusion, and together they dart back toward the food court, holding onto each other and constantly pushing each other forward, so at least one of them makes it. But honestly, with the thought of El all alone with Billy, he's almost positive they're both lucid enough to push on.

They reach the food court, Mike first. He practically skids to a halt, the sight of the *colossal* Mindflayer standing over Billy shocking him to his core. El is right behind him, trying to push herself onto her elbows, frantically pushing back against the floor, putting some distance between herself and the scene. Mike can't move, again. He just watches.

Billy blocks an arm of the Mindflayer, gives it something to latch onto, something other than El, and suddenly he's being dragged up to its mouth, hollering as it pierces through his body. He lets out one final, guttural scream before it launches into his heart.

Up till now, Max has been silent. Only now can Mike tear his gaze away. Max's face slowly breaks into a cry, of shock, maybe pain, regardless, Mike offers his hand to her. She takes it, buckling forward, and covers her mouth with her free hand. But no real sound comes out.

"It'll be okay," he says, or at least he tries, but it's barely a whisper and the Mindflayer is screeching, slowly collapsing to the ground under nothing but its own weight. And then it's silent.

Only then is Mike aware that the others are back, and at least El wasn't all alone. But now he rushes forward, pulling Max out of her stupor with him.

"*El!*" he cries out, reaching out for her, pulling her up into a hug. She cries silently into his shoulder.

Beside them, Max slowly walks forward, gaze stuck on her dying stepbrother.

Still, no words.

Until, "You piece of shit."

She doesn't say anything else, but breaks into loud sobs, the first real sound after the silence that followed the Flayer's death; her cries echo through the nearly empty, broken mall hallways. Mike isn't sure if she's upset about Billy, or if the situation has just broken her, but El shifts out of his arms and crawls forward to Max, pulling her into her lap. Sobs shake Max's body and she curls into a fetal post against El, clinging to her, and El strokes her hair quietly. "I'm sorry," is the only other thing Mike hears the girl mutter.

Mike pushes himself up off the ground, now more than acutely aware of the headache pounding away in the middle of his forehead. Distantly, he thinks to look for his sister, to find someone else familiar in all the smoke.

He's only wandering around for a minute before someone slams against him, pulling him into a tight hug.

"You're alive," Will breathes against his shoulder, his fingers curling

into Mike's shoulders. "Holy shit."

Mike lets all of his weight fall into this hug, against a familiar body, into the sense of relief he feels at the fact that Will is alright. Alive.

"Ditto?" Mike offers quietly. He chuckles a little, laughing in the face of insanity, and lifts his hands to Will's back, only holding on for a moment before the boy pulls away. Looks at him.

"What happened to your face?" Will asks, and then suddenly his hands are cradling Mike's cheeks, without another thought in the world about how that might look, and he presses at the edges of what seems to be bruised and bleeding near Mike's nose and cheekbone. "What the *fuck*?"

Mike swats at his hands. "S fine." He looks Will over, sees no sign of injury, and lets out a heavy sigh of relief. "You're okay?"

"Yeah," Will says, tears welling in his eyes, of pain or relief or something else, Mike doesn't know; but he mirrors it, something welling up inside him. "I'm okay."

"Okay." Mike smiles. "Let's get out of here."

All sorts of emergency personnel swarm in the parking lot. Mike holds on tight to his friends' hands until he's directed into the back of an ambulance for some tests of his vitals. Apparently, he'll be fine; he's given a blanket and an ice pack for his face and told to stay put until his parents get here.

He's adjacent to Will's truck. Adjacent to their siblings, who huddle in the back together. He catches Will's eye and offers a smile.

For now, he's fine being adjacent to okay, or normal, or whatever. They made it through.

They survived.

Most of them.

Notes for the Chapter:

hey everyone!!! thank you all so much for your kind comments and I'm so sorry for not posting for well over a year. I thought covid/2020 would give me more time to write and work on these stories that I really love, but instead, it gave me crippled mental health. ahaha. so I kinda had to focus on getting myself through. sorry loves!!!

I'm super excited to move forward with this story; I had to get through a ton of action this chapter, so I hope the flow was okay! anyway, feel free to talk to me in the comments/hmu on tumblr - let's get through this hiatus together :D